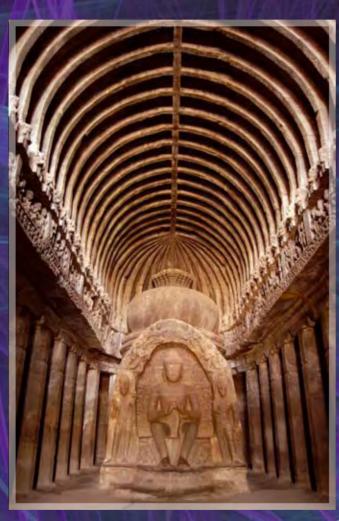
# PRABUDDHA BHARATA or AWAKENED INDIA

A monthly journal of the Ramakrishna Order started by Swami Vivekananda in 1896





July 2010

Our Cultural Heritage

An Early World Wide Web

Vol. 115, No. 7

# THE ROAD TO WISDOM

# SWAMI VIVEKANANDA ON CROSS-CULTURAL UNDERSTANDING-I



ITH every man, there is an idea; the external man is only the outward manifestation, the mere language of this idea within. Likewise, every nation has a corresponding national idea. This idea is working for the world and is necessary for its preservation. The day when the necessity of an idea as an element for the preservation of the world is over, that very day the receptacle of that idea, whether it be an individual or a nation, will meet destruction. The reason that we Indians are still living, in spite of so much misery, distress, poverty, and oppression from within and without is that we have a national idea, which is yet necessary for the preservation of the world. The Europeans too have a national idea of their own, without which the world will not go on; therefore they are so strong. Does a man live a moment, if he loses all his strength? A nation is the sum total of so many individual men; will a nation live if it has utterly lost all its strength and activity? Why did not this Hindu race die out, in the face of so many troubles and tumults of a thousand years? If our customs and manners are so very bad, how is it that we have not been effaced from the face of the earth by this time? Have the various foreign conquerors spared any pains to crush us

out? Why, then, were not the Hindus blotted out of existence, as happened with men in other countries which are uncivilised? Why has not India depopulated and turned into a wilderness? Why, then foreigners would have lost no time to come and settle in India, and till her fertile lands in the same way as they did and are still doing in America, Australia, and Africa! Well, then, my foreigner, you are not so strong as you think yourself to be; it is a vain imagination. First understand that India has strength as well, has a substantial reality of her own yet. Furthermore, understand that India is still living, because she has her own quota yet to give to the general store of the world's civilisation. And you too understand this full well, I mean those of our countrymen who have become thoroughly Europeanised both in external habits and in ways of thought and ideas, and who are continually crying their eyes out and praying to the European to save them-'We are degraded, we have come down to the level of brutes; O ye European people, you are our saviours, have pity on us and raise us from this fallen state!'

From The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda, 5.443.







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# Vol. 115, No. 7 July 2010



Amrita Kalasha

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# **Contents**

Traditional Wisdom

410	This Month
411	Editorial: Cross-cultural Understanding
413	Our Cultural Heritage Swami Ranganathananda
418	Swami Vivekananda's Message for the Global Era Swami Girishananda
421	An Early World Wide Web: Religions of Eurasia Dr Alan Hunter
427	Koyasan: A Buddhist Pilgrimage Dr Dipak Sengupta
432	Swami Brahmananda Swami Prabhavananda
437	The Crimson Hibiscus: Songs for the Divine Mother Srinjay Chakravarti
443	The Poetic Philosophy of <i>Ramcharitmanas</i> A P N Pankaj
448	Vedanta-sara Swami Bhaskareswarananda
450	Mahendranath Gupta: From Death to Immortality Swami Chetanananda
454	Reviews

Reports

455

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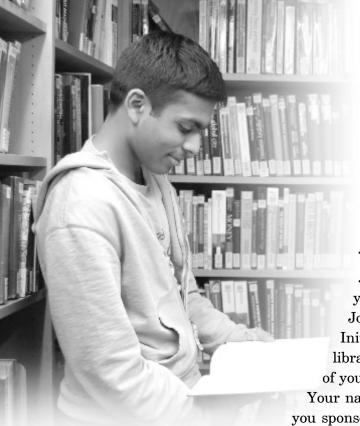


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# SRI RAMAKRISHNA IN TODAY'S VIOLENT WORLD Discussing the Message of Sri Remekr shine in the Centest of Correcting Violence and Hostility Pages viii + 208

# Sri Ramakrishna In Today's Violent World

An attempt to understand the role of Sri Ramakrishna in preventing and curing the humanity of the disease of violence.

Though we live in an age of violence, we all know that violence cannot be the way of life. While providing arms to self-defence groups, making stringent laws and holding peace meets has a limited effect, the real remedy lies in nurturing the Source of our being—which is full of peace, love and joy—and growing in tolerance and the timeless wisdom of sages. Sri Ramakrishna has a special role to play in this context. The present volume contains the articles that originally appeared in December 2004 issue of *The Vedanta Kesari*.

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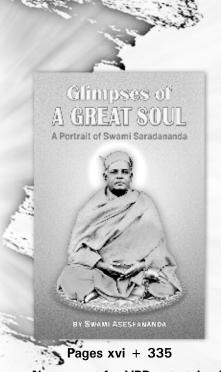
# **Glimpses of A Great Soul**

Swami Saradananda, a direct disciple of Sri Ramakrishna, was known for his profound devotion to Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi, genuine concern for others, plain commonsense and an extraordinary serenity of mind.

The present volume is an intimate portrait of the personality of Swami Saradananda, providing rich details of his personal life and dealings. It brings into light his magnanimous heart, keen intellect and practical insights into life.

Swami Aseshananda, the author, was initiated by Holy Mother. He served as Swami Saradananda's private secretary for seven years. In 1955, he became the head of Vedanta Society of Portland, Oregon, USA, until his passing away in 1996.

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# TRADITIONAL WISDOM

उत्तिष्ठत जाग्रत प्राप्य वरान्निबोधत । Arise! Awake! And stop not till the goal is reached!

# **Divine Law**

July 2010 Vol. 115, No. 7

# ऋतं च सत्यं चाभीद्धात्तपसोऽध्यजायत । ततो रात्र्यजायत ततः समुद्दो अर्णवः ॥

From the tapas of the manifest Supreme Being were born righteousness and truth; from these arose night and day and thence the ocean of water.

(Rig Veda, 10.190.1)

By divine Law are all forms manifested;

Inexpressible is the Law.

By divine Law are beings created;

By Law are some exalted.

By divine Law are beings marked with nobility or ignominy;

By the Law are they visited with bliss or bale.

On some by His Law falls grace;

Others by His Law are whirled around in cycles of births and deaths.

(Adi Granth, 2)

By whom was this image wrought? And where can its maker be? Where has this image arisen? And where does it come to cease?

Neither self-wrought is this image; Nor yet other-wrought is this misery. By reason of a cause it came to be; By breaking up the cause it ceases to be.

(Samyutta Nikaya, 'Sagatha Vagga', 5.9)

Tao, being a hollow vessel, Is never exhaustible in use. Fathomless,

Perhaps the fountainhead of all existences.

(Tao-te-Ching, 4)

PB July 2010 409

# THIS MONTH

**Cross-cultural Understanding** is contingent upon several factors, not least empathy and suspension of judgement. This and the following number show us how.



Syncretic, impersonal, and spiritual elements grant Indian culture its unique resilience. Swami Ranganathananda, the thirteenth president of the Ramakrishna Order,

points out how these features give a perennial significance to **Our Cultural Heritage**.

If Swami Vivekananda worked to mitigate the ills plaguing Indian society, his message also had a global dimension. Swami Girishananda, a trustee of the Ramakrishna Math, highlights this in Swami Vivekananda's Message for the Global Era. The author resides at Belur Math.

In **An Early World Wide Web: Religions of Eurasia**, Dr Alan Hunter argues that the major institutionalized Eurasian religions of the ancient world drew heavily from a shared cultural and religious heritage, and that this accounts for much of their similarities. The author is Professor of Asian Studies and Director, Centre for Peace and Reconciliation Studies, Coventry University.

**Koyasan: A Buddhist Pilgrimage** is Dr Dipak Sengupta's engaging description of a short stay at Koyasan, the headquarters of the Buddhist Shin-

gon sect. The author is former Chief General Manager, Coal India Limited.



Swami Brahmananda, the spiritual son of Sri Ramakrishna, was known for his deep spiritual insight and extraordinary ability to guide seekers of Truth. Swami Prabhavananda, the founder Minister-in-Charge, Vedanta Society of Southern California, Hollywood, shares his reminiscences of this remarkable divine personage.



E C C S S H

Sri Srinjay
Chakravarti, Content
Editor, Mergermarket
Group, concludes his presentation of The Crimson
Hibiscus: Songs for the
Divine Mother with reflec-

tions on the transcendental and mundane aspects and cultural roles of Kali-kirtan.

In the concluding instalment of **The Poetic Philosophy of** *Ramcharitmanas* Sri A P N Pankaj dwells on the characteristics of the student of *Manas* as well as on Tulsi's humility. The author is a littérateur of repute from Chandigarh.



In the fifth instalment of **Vedanta-sara** Swami Bhaskareswarananda, former President, Rama-krishna Math, Nagpur, begins his discussion on *adhyasa*, superimposition, and its basis in *ajnana*, ignorance.

Swami Chetanananda, Minister-in-Charge, Vedanta Society of St Louis, gives a vivid and detailed account of the last days of **Mahendranath Gupta: From Death to Immortality**.

# **Cross-cultural Understanding**

CCORDING TO THE NIHONSHOKI, an ancient Japanese chronicle compiled by imperial a order in 720 CE, Buddhism came to Japan in 538 CE during the reign of Kinmei-Tenno, the twenty-ninth emperor of Japan. Syong-Myong, the king of the Korean state of Paikche, sent a mission to Japan seeking alliance against hostile neighbours. Among the gifts sent to the Japanese emperor were a gold-plated bronze image of Buddha, several volumes of Buddhist sutras, and a letter in which Syong-Myong praised the merits of spreading the new religion. Emperor Kinmei-Tenno sought the opinion of his ministers on adopting the new religion. The conservative Nakatomi and Mononobe families firmly opposed such a move as they felt worship of a foreign kami, deity, would bring the wrath of the indigenous *kami* on the empire. However, on the advice of Iname no Sukune of the powerful Soga family in charge of foreign relations with Korea, the emperor decided to accept the scriptures and regard the image 'tentatively' as an object of worship. For this purpose, Iname no Sukune's house was turned into a temple.

Unfortunately, no sooner had this new temple been established than an epidemic erupted in the country and continued to worsen till the emperor was forced to have the new Buddha image thrown into a canal and the temple burnt down. Nevertheless, within a year's time, a camphor log was found floating on the ocean accompanied by miraculous voices singing Buddhist chants, and the emperor had two Buddhist images made out of the log.

If this miracle was enough to convince Kinmei-Tenno of the power of the new religion, there were also other forces aiding this acceptance. The Soga clan was 'strongly in favour of a policy of rapidly absorbing Chinese knowledge and ideas, since the Japanese state then emerging lagged far behind its mighty continental neighbour in culture and political organization. And Buddhism had become an important part of Chinese culture—spiritually, economically, and politically—by the sixth century.

The entry of Buddhism into China was itself marked by significant cross-cultural tensions. Buddhism reached Han China along the silk routes from Central Asia in the first century. It had earlier been taken from India to Central Asia by monks and merchants. That it received a fairly friendly reception in Central Asia was probably due to the cosmopolitan nature of this area—it was the meeting place of Kushana, Parthian, Indo-Scythian, Sogdian, Chinese, and Indian elements. But Han China was different: 'A colossal empire and a millenarian civilization, dominated by very clearly defined political and social ideas and norms that had taken shape in the course of centuries. It was ruled by an educated elite in which the feelings of cultural identity and superiority were very strongly developed, and it was based on an ideal of total political and social order that left little room for the propagation of a doctrine of individual salvation.' And to top it all, for the proud Hans, Buddhism was of 'barbaric' origin.

As luck would have it, the Han Empire soon disintegrated. Following the 'barbarian' conquest of the north, China fell into disunion and political chaos for over three hundred years, and this very period saw the marked spread of Buddhism across China. Buddhism now provided a complement, if not an alternative, to the official Confucian ideology that had apparently failed the state. Non-Chinese rulers also patronized Buddhism as a counter to indigenous ideologies and as a means to 'prosperity and military victories by means of prayers and spells'.

PB July 2010 4 I I

Confucianism was not the sole challenge to Buddhism in China. There was also Taoism, 'which was, in a more individualistic way, directed towards tangible goals: the acquisition of bodily immortality, and harmony with the concrete forces of nature'. From the Tao viewpoint 'the Buddhist rejection of all existence, and especially the Mahayana doctrine of the utter unreality of all phenomena was easily regarded as a kind of morbid nihilism and identified with *yin*, the principle of darkness and death'. Ideas of karma, rebirth, and nirvana, 'which in India had been universally accepted [as] parts of religious culture, in China became bizarre novelties, fundamentally different from, and not seldom incompatible with, well-established Chinese notions'.

But there were also Taoist elements that were akin to Buddhist concepts and served as channels for the easy comprehension and spread of Buddhist ideas. There were Taoist deities thought to guide believers from their supernal dwellings, and many Taoist terms were used by early translators to render Buddhist ideas into Chinese. According to a Han source, Buddha was soon seen as an incarnation of Lao-tzu: 'Lao-tzu after his departure to the west (an old legendary theme) went to the "barbarians" and manifested himself there as the Buddha, in order to convert them to a primitive doctrine of his own making, a kind of "Taoism made easy", adapted to the low intellectual level of Indian savages'!

These snippets provide valuable insights into the diverse forces that characterize all cross-cultural interaction. If the Chinese notion of Indians as 'barbarians' was only a reflection of their ignorance of contemporary Indian culture, we still remain largely unfamiliar with cultures and religions other than our own, even though we live on a globe that is supposed to be shrinking daily with the inflation of knowledge and connectivity. Worse still, we are often uninformed about our own religion and culture.

To understand religious behaviour we need to be familiar with traditions. A range of Islamic practices, for instance, are simply a respectful imitation of Sunna, Prophet Muhammad's actions. As Akbar S Ahmed writes: 'Across the world his followers would imitate the Prophet with affection in every kind of activity—abstaining from alcohol and pig's meat, colouring a man's beard with henna, using green for clothes and flags, enjoying honey, talking softly, eating moderately and sleeping little.'

The cultural contexts in which religious figures and their teachings are set are repeatedly re-appropriated by succeeding generations. Daniel-Rops' *Jesus and His Times* argues: 'Pious usage and the historic sense alike agree that we represent Jesus in the surroundings which were familiar to him. ... There is value in every detail of the visible world which surrounded the corporeal being of the familiar presence which is, in so many aspects, indissolubly woven into the most secret places of our being.'

Understanding these cultural contexts can also be profoundly educative. Remarking on the wealth of detail in the Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna, Aldous Huxley observes: 'To Western readers, it is true, this fidelity and this wealth of detail are sometimes a trifle disconcerting; for the social, religious and intellectual frames of reference within which Sri Ramakrishna did his thinking and expressed his feelings were entirely Indian. But after the first few surprises and bewilderments, we begin to find something peculiarly stimulating and instructive about the very strangeness and, to our eyes, the eccentricity of the man revealed to us in "M's" narrative. What a scholastic philosopher would call the "accidents" of Ramakrishna's life were intensely Hindu and therefore, so far as we in the West are concerned, unfamiliar and hard to understand; its "essence", however, was intensely mystical and therefore universal. To read through these conversations in which mystical doctrine alternates with an unfamiliar kind of humour, and where discussions of the oddest aspects of Hindu mythology give place to the most profound and subtle utterances about the nature of Ultimate Reality, is in itself a liberal education in humility, tolerance and suspense of judgement.' These last-mentioned qualities are also fundamental requisites for genuine C PB cross-cultural understanding.

4I2 PB July 2010

# Our Cultural Heritage

# Swami Ranganathananda

ERY FEW MEMORIAL LECTURES HAVE attracted me and inspired me to participate as much as this lecture in the name of Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel. It is a name to be remembered for ages in India. I had occasion to meet him in Karachi when he came there to conduct the very crucial elections just before partition. He and Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, came to Karachi to see that the Congress won, so that partition would not take place. After exchanging ideas and thoughts I told him that as I was going to Delhi I would like to meet him there and discuss some matters. Though he was such an outstanding personality, things were very informal at that time. He suggested that he would be in the Parliament, and upon my visit there I could wait for him in the visitors' gallery. He would then call me at the appropriate time. That was the simple arrangement in those days. So I came to Delhi, went to the Parliament, sat in the visitors' gallery, and then raised my hand. He looked up and recognized me. After the session was over we met in a room adjoining his main office and had our discussions. That was the personal relationship I had with him apart from what I have studied about him and his great contribution to Indian freedom.

Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel is one of the outstanding leaders of modern India. The youth must study him—his life, his courage, and his high character—a source of eternal inspiration for our young people. The pioneers of each country are always studied and remembered by subsequent generations. For instance, every American child learns about its founding fathers—Washington and others. India has a

This is a minimally edited text of the first of the author's two Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel memorial lectures, delivered at Bombay on 3 and 4 November 1986.

set of outstanding founding fathers of the modern period. Our education must inspire our generations with the qualities of leadership, great patriotism, tremendous courage, and intense humanism of all these great leaders. Among them, Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel has a very high place. Sardar Patel was not handling a new nation, a new people. He was handling a very ancient culture which was facing the challenge of the modern period. And so we shall have to first study this wonderful culture that has come to us as a great heritage from the past.

#### **Blending and Synthesis**

On this subcontinent of India a big cultural experiment was staged by the ancient Vedic and pre-Vedic people. They became unified into a single people. That is the beginning of India: a wonderful assimilation of two types of cultures—one urban, the other rural. The Aryan was rural and the Indus Valley was urban. There may have been a little conflict in the beginning as always happens, but the greatest thing that took place was the huge synthesis of diverse elements, and that has continued to be the hallmark of Indian culture. If the Vedic and pre-Vedic people can blend together into a great people, then another two, another three, another four can also join together. That is what has happened to Indian culture.

Behind this great blending and synthesis was a spiritual vision, a philosophical outlook which came to be known as 'unity in diversity'. Diversity enriches a culture. We do not want to destroy diversity, but we shall subject our diversity to a central thread of spiritual unity. That was the vision of the ancient sages. That vision has continued to inspire India through the ages, including this modern period. Originally it was a spiritual vision—the one behind the many, one thread of spiritual unity

PB July 2010 4I3

running through all of us. Some of the most beautiful verses of the Upanishads deal with this great subject. The senses reveal to us diversity and variety. This becomes a challenge to the human mind. Is it really true? Is there a unity behind this diversity? This is a great scientific quest. In modern physical science we ask the same question. Is this diversity the main truth about nature? Is there a unity behind this diversity? In various departments of science—physics, chemistry, botany, zoology—in every one of them we ask this question. The senses reveal diversity. Is it true? Then, we penetrate into the heart of nature and discover unity behind this diversity.

This idea is prominently expressed in modern biology. Darwin says there is a wonderful kinship between one species and the other—between humans, animals, and plants. And biology tries to find links between one phenomenon and another. This search for the one principle behind humankind was an exceptional search that ancient thinkers undertook in India. Behind our culture is a profound thinking, profound philosophy. First, there is a scientific outlook on the external world, and second, a scientific outlook on the internal world of the human being. Indians did discover great truths of the physical sciences. An eleventh century Arab Muslim scholar from Spain places India as the foremost among nations that have cultivated and contributed to the physical sciences. That was India's first contribution. But the search for unity did not end there. It entered into the human spirit. Human beings are different from one another; different colours—black, white, brown—and various other differences are there. What is the ultimate truth about humankind? It is in this field that India achieved a striking breakthrough that has come down to us as the greatest wisdom of India, the greatest contribution to world thought.

# Unity in Religion, Nature, and among Humans

Indians discovered a profound unity behind the diversity of human types. In the world of religion they discovered unity. In the world of nature they discovered unity. In the world of human beings also

they discovered unity. In the world of religion that was a momentous discovery. You get it in the Rig Veda: 'Ekam sat vipra bahudha vadanti; Truth is one, sages call it by various names.' It is one of the outstanding utterances of Indian culture. This was a great utterance which was strengthened and reinforced by subsequent teachers and thinkers until it became one of the important cultural inheritances of the people of India. The spirit of harmony, the spirit of concord, and the spirit of tolerance and acceptance that is so characteristic of India comes from this first great discovery in the Rig Veda, that is, unity in religion.

Second, unity in the whole of nature. Everything in this world comes from one original source. That is the great idea you find in the Upanishads. The first verse of the Rig Veda deals with the principle of fire. Fire is a supreme reality in this world. The whole universe is a manifestation of fire. It is not this fire that you find on earth, but the very principle of fire—the fire in your heart, fire in the sun, and fire in your stomach digesting food—they all belong to the same category. There is unity behind all these. That was a remarkable generalization. These are all tremendous achievements of the human mind very early in history.

Finally, turning to human beings, we see all differences outside. Let us penetrate into ourselves. It was in this field that India contributed something unique that has never been repeated anywhere else. This is the discovery of the one behind the many, the one infinite in all beings, like a thread that runs through all the gems in a necklace. Gems are different in colour or shape, but the thread unites all of them. This discovery of the one single spiritual thread of being behind all this diversity has been sung in a very inspiring language in several Upanishads.

The great scientist Sir J C Bose demonstrated before the Royal Society in London his discovery of a fundamental unity behind all matter, the living and the non-living. Though they appeared different, he could discover a unity behind them. That demonstrative speech received high comments from *The Times* of London. At the end of his speech, Bose

4I4 PB July 2010

referred to this wonderful ancient heritage of India. When he saw the results of his scientific experiments, he realized the greatness of the ancient Indian sages who discovered, sitting on the banks of the Ganga, this profound truth of unity in diversity, unity in variety. He quoted from the *Katha Upanishad*: 'Eko vashi sarva-bhutantaratma; the one Controller, the Self in all beings' and 'rupam rupam pratirupo babhuva; assumes separate forms in respect of different shapes'. To those who realize this truth belongs eternal peace. One infinite Reality appears in diverse forms. Realize this truth. That is the way to gain life. That is the way to become truly immortal. That is a wonderful passage he quoted towards the end of his lecture.

It is here that we have the spiritual philosophical foundation of a tremendous cultural experiment that has continued for five thousand years and that has given us an 'immortality' not found anywhere else in the world. To give a firm foundation to India's cultural experiment, and that too on a continental scale, has been the greatest contribution of the Vedic sages. They have given a firm basis for Indian culture. In discovering the immortal behind the mortal human being, they made the culture itself immortal. How many challenges came to this culture! A fraction of these challenges has destroyed many cultures in the world. But India could

stand all this because of the extraordinary spiritual strength behind its culture.

### How Is Indian Culture Spiritual?

Writers and speakers generally say that Indian culture is spiritual. What does it mean? Does it mean that all the people of India are spiritual? India has its own share of wicked people, non-spiritual people, evil people. But if this statement has any meaning, it means this: that the direction of Indian culture is towards the high spiritual Truth hidden in every human being and that the honour the nation gives to any person depends upon the spiritual quality of that person. You can study a culture by asking the question: What is the highest human excellence that is appreciated in that culture? In one culture it is military power, in another culture it is intellectual strength, in another it may be money. In India, all these are respected, but the highest respect goes to a person of God, one who has realized oneness with all through spiritual development. Throughout history, India has maintained this quality; the highest person in India is a person of God, a person of spiritual realization. Indian hearts recognize in that person someone great and in this recognition there is no distinction of creed, no distinction of religion—any religion showing high spiritual quality will receive adoration from the people of India. It is not credal,



it is not dogmatic, it is just spiritual; that person—whatever may be his or her origin in a particular race and particular religion—has gone beyond the many. That is why many Muslim mystics and mystics of other religions are honoured in this country. They represent the spiritual development of the human being, the spiritual fulfilment of humankind.

This was the background of the developments in Indian culture, commencing from the Vedic period. Very few cultures have received this philosophical and spiritual stimulus from behind. That is why there has been a succession of great teachers, great spiritual luminaries, throughout Indian history. Even in the most difficult and tumultuous period of history India did not fail to produce great spiritual teachers. Take the sixteenth century—Babar's invasion. The whole of North India was shattered. There was so much suffering and killing, so many men and women were taken away as slaves at that time. In Babar's history you will find the story. At that very time, in that very Punjab, where these events largely took place, India produced a Guru Nanak. He could see all the problems going around, the sufferings of the people; and he had referred to those issues in his own songs as well.

Guru Nanak provided a new type of approach to the challenge that India faced at that time, harmonizing the new elements that had come. Several times has India achieved this harmony. New people come. When the Greeks came, India took from the Greeks their great ideas and developed a synthesis of Indian and Greek cultures at that time. Foreign invaders came, they brought their culture. Slowly India assimilated them and became richer with such assimilation. Then came the Muslim period, the great invasion.

In the beginning it was all a good way of India's religious relationships; missionaries came, spoke of great ideas. Then came invaders. It is when invaders came that the challenge became very big. To meet that challenge India had to produce great personalities, great movements. Guru Nanak represents that tremendous response of the very spirit of India. If there is anything good in the new system,

India shall take it in. So he became a harmonizer of the Hindu and the Muslim traditions, and in all the bhakti movements that came thereafter there is the impress of these two—the spiritual heritage of India and the social heritage of Islam. That is why they were democratic. This democratization took place in the middle ages. It was needed because from ancient times India classified the humans in society into the four varnas: brahmana, kshatriya, vaishya, and shudra. It is an old classification. Originally it never meant anything more than certain capacities, certain talents, certain roles that people play. But slowly it became ossified. All evil elements began to enter into it. It was at that time that India faced Islamic invasion, Islamic influence; and the essential influence of Islam is that social democratic experiment in which there is no distinction between one human being and another.

So, the democracy of Islam strengthened Indian society at that time, though conditions were markedly unpropitious. There was violence and destruction everywhere—destruction of temples, destruction of holy places—even then India had that wonderful mind to take what is good from any system that came from outside. All the religions that took birth in India were living side by side in harmony and cooperation; and there were many such religions. First came the Vedic religion, and this religion itself contains many facets. Then arose, in the sixth and fifth centuries BCE, the great Buddhism and Jainism. These were all wonderful developments—great spiritual teachers instructing people how to live in peace with oneself, in peace with others.

#### Impersonal Culture

Buddhism has as its background the entire spiritual philosophical development prior to it; the ancient Upanishads, the great Bhagavadgita teachings of Sri Krishna—all these were there behind the development of Buddhism. It was strengthening the nation, giving it a tremendous spiritual and social vigour and dynamism. Buddha himself was an extraordinary personality. India has a culture and a philosophy that is essentially impersonal. Nobody

has founded the religions of India. Nobody has founded this culture. The discoveries of a number of thinkers and scientists constitute the basis of the culture of this country. In many other places one individual stands behind a culture or behind a religion. But the Vedas contain so many sages. We do not know who they were. We know so little about their life, but their thoughts are wonderful. We have an expression for this cultural, religious, and philosophical heritage. We call it apaurusheya. What is known as Hindu religion and philosophy is apaurusheya. There is no purusha, person, behind it. It is thoroughly impersonal. It is based upon a number of truths that are universal. They were discovered by the sages. You can rediscover them. That is the nature of scientific truth.

So, this science of the human being in depth, this adhyatma vidya, is the product of great sages. They gave us this insight and asked us to check and verify this profound truth. When Vivekananda addressed the Chicago Parliament of Religions in 1893, he explained this Indian approach to religion. By the Vedas, he said, no books are meant; they are the accumulated treasury of spiritual laws discovered by different persons at different times, and the discoverers of those laws are called rishis or sages. They may belong to any caste, any community, any race. And he added that he was glad to tell the august audience that some of the greatest of these sages were women. Very early in its history, India had an impersonal background to its cultural, philosophical, and spiritual experiments. No other system had this kind of an impersonal background. Because it is impersonal, it is universal. No person can dictate to the Indian people. An impersonal truth is universal. Two plus two is four to everyone in any part of the world. So, spiritual truths are universal. You can realize them for yourself. That is the background of India's development.

Against this impersonal background, India produced a galaxy of mighty personalities in every department of life. Great scientists, great humanists, great spiritual teachers, great intellectuals—all these great personalities developed upon that impersonal

background. In its prehistoric period, India had Rama and Krishna—two great personalities that dominated Indian culture, whose influence has gone beyond India to all over South East Asia. In the historic period India had Buddha and Mahavira—two gigantic personalities. Buddha was born a prince, but renounced that princely life and became an ascetic trying to realize this truth in the forest through deep meditation. This story has been with us for two thousand five hundred years. What a wonderful event it was in human history. A prince renouncing a kingdom, going into the forest, entering into deep meditation, and realizing profound truths—and within a few centuries Buddha entered into the hearts of millions and millions of people throughout Asia. That is a remarkable movement. The great Mahavira and the Jain religion were confined to India. But Buddhism went outside India.

Buddhism is the first great missionary religion; and because of the Upanishadic background, that Vedantic background of tolerance, understanding, and intense concord among religions you find one quality in the expansion of Buddhism within and outside India—absolute tolerance. Not a single act of violence or persecution you find associated with the expansion of Buddhism in and outside India. This cannot be said of any religion born outside India. Every religion born in India has this touch: the spirit of harmony, the spirit of understanding.

In the wake of Buddha came the great cultural development of India—all-round development. Indian morale went up, its economic conditions went up, and many other outstanding developments took place at that time. Vivekananda says that the most glorious period of India's long history was just three hundred years after Buddha, when his spirit of humanism spread throughout the nation. Ashoka opened hospitals not only for human beings but for animals as well. That was the compassion realized by this great spiritual personality. In the wake of Buddha came great empires, great political states and the greatest of them was the Mauryan empire of Indian history.

(To be concluded)

PB July 2010 4I7

# Swami Vivekananda's Message for the Global Era

### Swami Girishananda

WAMI VIVEKANANDA IS one of the earliest of Indian spiritual and cultural ambassadors to the West. Columbus 'discovered' America, and following this 'discovery' European nations could establish occidental culture in the Americas. In a new twist to history, four hundred years after Columbus reached America, Swami Vivekananda, as a representative of the eastern hemisphere, captivated with his spiritual message not only a nascent America but also sections of a much older Europe. Sri Aurobindo said that 'the going forth of Vivekananda, marked out by the Master as the heroic soul destined to take the world between his two hands and change it, was the first visible sign to the world that India was awake'. Sri Ramakrishna had once prophesied about his favourite disciple, 'Naren will teach, when he gives a call at home and abroad.' Swamiji fulfilled his master's prediction in an extraordinary manner.

Swami Vivekananda was a veritable king whose spiritual conquests were no less remarkable than those of Ashoka. Romain Rolland remarks: 'His pre-eminent characteristic was kingliness. He was a born king and nobody ever came near him either in India or America without paying homage to his

Sri Ramakrishna's drawing in which he wrote: 'Naren will teach, when he gives a call at home and abroad.'



majesty.' Mrs John Henry Wright, who met him before the Chicago Parliament of Religions had this to say about his regality: 'There was a commanding dignity and impressiveness in the carriage of his neck and bare head that caused everyone in sight to stop and look [at] him; he moved slowly, with the swinging tread of one who had never hastened.' Mrs Mary Funke wrote, 'I can see him yet as he stepped upon the platform, a regal, majestic figure, vital, forceful, dominant.'

#### The Root of India's Problems

Swamiji's was indeed a commanding presence. But what condition was India in when he was touring his motherland as an itinerant monk? A thousand years of political subjugation and turmoil had steeped her into utter poverty and backwardness. Hinduism was being misrepresented in the West as nothing but a bundle of superstition. Caste distinctions, social discrimination, and internal strife had weakened the country and led her into a miserable state of decay and degeneration. One of the main impulses for Swamiji's going to the West was to reestablish India in her pristine glory, both materially as well as spiritually.

Swamiji travelled far and wide across India, spending time in the houses of its lowliest citizens as well as in those of kings and intellectuals, of orthodox pundits and reformers fascinated by Western ideas. He had his experiences with the old conservatives strongly opposed to any 'reawakening' of the masses. He heard the voices of reformers preaching against idolatry, early marriage, and such other practices of the Hindus. He realized first hand that the common people, especially women, had been neglected for

ages. He sat in meditation at Kanyakumari reflecting on his sad experience of day-to-day Indian life. Later, on 19 March 1894, he wrote to his brother disciple Swami Ramakrishnananda:

My brother, in view of all this, specially of the poverty and ignorance, I had no sleep. At Cape Comorin sitting in Mother Kumari's temple, sitting on the last bit of Indian rock—I hit upon a plan: We are so many Sannyasins wandering about, and teaching the people metaphysics—it is all madness.

Did not our Gurudeva use to say, 'An empty stomach is no good for religion'? ...

We, as a nation, have lost our individuality, and that is the cause of all mischief in India. We have to give back to the nation its lost individuality and raise the masses. The Hindu, the Mohammedan, the Christian, all have trampled them underfoot. Again the force to raise them must come from inside, that is, from the orthodox Hindus. In every country the evils exist not with, but against, religion. Religion therefore is not to blame, but men.

Swami Vivekananda's keen observation of the condition of Indian masses and women had given him the conviction that India's downfall was due to utter neglect by a cruel Indian society. In his letter of 20 August 1893 to Alasinga Perumal, he wrote:

Oh, how my heart ached to think of what we think of the poor, the low, in India. They have no chance, no escape, no way to climb up. The poor, the low, the sinner in India have no friends, no help—they cannot rise, try however they may. They sink lower and lower every day, they feel the blows showered upon them by a cruel society, and they do not know whence the blow comes. They have forgotten that they too are men. And the result is slavery. Thoughtful people within the last few years have seen it, but unfortunately laid it at the door of the Hindu religion, and to them, the only way of bettering is by crushing this grandest religion of the world. Hear me, my friend, I have discovered the secret through the grace of the Lord. Religion is not in fault. On the other hand, your religion teaches you that every being is only your own self multiplied. But it was the want of practical application, the want of sympathy—the want of heart. The Lord once more came to you as Buddha and taught you how to feel, how to sympathise with the poor, the miserable, the sinner, but you heard Him not.

Swami Vivekananda envisaged a national regeneration in which all, particularly the downtrodden masses, would be given every opportunity and assistance to achieve all-round progress and well-being. His thoughts on the ingredients necessary for the regeneration of India can be summarized in the following points, which he expressed in his interactions with various Indians: i) elevating the masses of India without injuring their religion; ii) motivating the rich and the affluent to assist the suffering millions; iii) providing women with opportunities for proper education and self-improvement; iv) imparting the right kind of education to the masses; v) undertaking industrial development; and vi) providing society with freedom, which is the first condition of growth. Towards this end he wanted to organize the youth, who are full of vigour and energy: 'A hundred thousand men and women, fired with the zeal of holiness, fortified with eternal faith in the Lord, and nerved to lion's courage by their sympathy for the poor and the fallen and the downtrodden, will go over the length and breadth of the land, preaching the gospel of salvation, the gospel of help, the gospel of social raising-up—the gospel of equality.'

#### **Global Transformation**

Swami Vivekananda was, of course, a global personality and a world teacher, and his movement aims at global transformation. On the one hand he accurately diagnosed the maladies that afflicted Indian society; he foresaw the dangers of material intoxication that pervaded Western society on the other. The West must shake hands with India and appreciate the eternal values nurtured by India as a perennial resource for quenching the lava of materialistic fire surreptitiously burning its people and societies. This was a crucial task for which the swami had been ordained by his master Sri Ramakrishna. In advocating a free exchange of ideas and skills between India and the West, Swamiji was paving the way for a future

PB July 2010 419

India that can stand on her own feet—bereft of poverty, hunger, and social inequality—and a West fulfilled by the eternal treasures, values, and science of the inner spiritual world of India.

That Swamiji depended on divine will and inspiration is evident from his refusal to hurry personal preparations for a visit to the West, even a few months before his actual departure. It was in Hyderabad—on 13 February 1893 at the Mehboob College—that he spoke on 'My Mission to the West'. In a personal interview with Nawab Sir Khurshid Jah, noted for his religious tolerance, he expounded the universal principles of Vedanta, and the Nawab offered to help him financially in his mission to the West. Only the previous month, as reported by the reputed journalist Kamakshi Natarajan of Madras, Swamiji had given a vigorous discourse to an audience presided over by Dewan Bahadur Raghunath Rao, in which he dwelt upon the Western interpretation of Eastern culture. 'It was here,' Natarajan later observed, 'that it was decided that the Swamiji should be sent to the Chicago Congress.'

Help also came from other quarters. His biographers note: 'Having learnt that the Swami was at Madras and that his disciples were collecting money for his voyage to the West, he [Raja Ajit Singh of Khetri] sent Jagmohanlal to bring him to Khetri. He also said that if the Swami fell short of funds, he (the Raja) was prepared to contribute from his personal account, since he heartily agreed with the Swami's intention of going to the West.' In the meantime, Swamiji had written to Sri Sarada Devi seeking her blessings for his proposed journey. Sri Sarada Devi readily assented as she had had a vision 'in which she saw the form of Sri Ramakrishna entering into the body of Narendra, signifying that the Master would thenceforth work in and through his chief disciple.'

On 11 September 1893 Swami Vivekananda presented himself to an audience of seven thousand at the Parliament of Religions in Chicago. He thanked the audience on behalf of the Hindu monks and the Hindu people. He spoke of the essence of Hinduism, which is acceptance of all faiths. The global platform, full of accomplished speakers,

was amazed to find this divine representative from India winning over not only the parliament but also the media and common people.

The result of this first historical speech by Swamiji vindicated Sri Ramakrishna's vision that Narendra would preach 'at home and abroad' and would be widely accepted. It also proved to the world that India remains a dynamo of spirituality capable of spiritually powering the globe. It provided all with a glimpse of the Indian view of genuine spirituality. Sri Ramakrishna had transported Narendra to a transcendental spiritual plane with a mere touch. Swami Vivekananda, in turn, touched the global parliament—attended largely by Western participants from varied walks of life by that very force and convinced its members of the greatness of India's eternal religion: the silent introvert Hinduism, without glamour, pomp, or splendour, whose followers lived in poverty and did not allow themselves to be blinded by outer magnificence. It is the message of the one supreme divine Spirit residing within every soul. It negates the hatred and violence within and between all religions and equally embraces each of them.

In the subsequent sessions of the Chicago parliament Vivekananda spoke at length on various facets of Hindu and Buddhist philosophies and also addressed the concluding session of 27 September. The interest in his speeches was reflected in Swamiji being reserved as the last speaker so that the audience could be held back till the end. The admiration that he attracted in the West made the whole of India proud and also conscious of her own rich spiritual heritage. The age-old teachings of Vedanta, with its modern interpretation given by Swami Vivekananda, came to be accepted by several Western scholars. Vedanta is also remarkable in being able to withstand the challenge of modern science.

Swami Vivekananda visited various important cities in the US—Boston, Detroit, New York, Madison, and Minneapolis, among others—after the Chicago chapter. From the *Life of Swami Vivekananda* we get to know that

(Continued on page 453)

# An Early World Wide Web: Religions of Eurasia

#### **Dr Alan Hunter**

AMUEL HUNTINGTON'S ANALYSIS of fault lines between civilizations postulates an alliance between China and Islam against Western values and Christianity, and many have argued that religions are as likely to be sources of violent conflict as of peaceful cooperation. However, other agencies—the World Conference of Religions for Peace, for example—dispute the inevitability of conflict and argue that religious communities can and should be key peace-builders in the twenty-first century. Many suggest this agenda can be pursued by promoting spirituality rather than dogmatics, by dialogue and mutual learning instead of literalism and evangelism.

I believe that a deeper understanding of what religions share—rather than insistence on what divides them—could also help to promote tolerance. In this article my primary argument is that each Eurasian religion is unique in a limited or surface sense, but is essentially bonded to other religions at deeper levels. It is quite legitimate to focus on differences and distinguishing factors, which is indeed a core purpose of mainstream scholarship. But this unique focus can also have constraining effects that can blind us to significant historical and cultural symmetries.

Christendom is already a southern, not northern, majority religion and will become increasingly non-Western in terms of population—a factor that may reshape the faith by aiding absorption of elements from the south, especially Asia and Africa. Meanwhile, the rapid development of Buddhism in the West also makes it a religion with global outreach. These developments could lead to tensions, but it could also favour a milder contact between

the two faiths as they interact in the future. And improved relations may provide a stimulus to work towards understanding their 'shared history', not their 'separate histories'.

Since about 400 CE Buddhism and Christianity evolved largely in isolation from each other. Allen has convincingly shown that Buddhist communities, even in neighbouring Asian countries—separated from each other by distances, mountains, and oceans—grew almost independently from each other, let alone with a global awareness.' At the same time, Christianity's memory of its earlier development from non-Christian origins was ruptured by early churches, while later on it was frequently co-opted into, or became symbiotic with, exploitative power structures in Europe, thus becoming a core component of European supremacy in imperialist expansion. Stereotypes of difference have become widely accepted to form a black-andwhite picture of two separate religions: Buddhism is an Asian faith, founded by Buddha, preaching an atheistic or agnostic doctrine with karma, reincarnation, and enlightenment as central tenets; Christianity is a Western monotheistic faith, founded by Jesus Christ, who was a unique Saviour from Palestine, crucified and resurrected. Many, though certainly not all, followers of both religions find their own religion significantly unique, perhaps 'more true' than other faiths. This view can lead to assertions of superiority and exclusive truth claims. Such assertions are often shaped, strengthened, and sharpened by hierarchical institutions.

This article has a broad sweep, many generalities, and doubtless some errors. Therefore, I would particularly welcome observations and improvements

PB July 2010 42I

from readers, especially those with better empirical data. My core argument is that throughout the cultural area of Eurasia a common stock of religious texts, ideas, and life-stories, adapted to and generated by local characteristics, was ascribed to saviour deities. Different cultures produced a series of developments, possibly from historical events, through myths and legends, to institutions and theologies; but these developments are essentially reconfigurations of a shared heritage. Of course, each religious group is unique, just as each individual on the planet is unique. But each individual on the planet is also interconnected with every other individual in profound ways—for example, by means of the human DNA. The recognition of our shared 'DNA', biological or cultural, may be a corrective to any exaggerated assertions of uniqueness, especially those that lead to a sense of superiority. A corollary of the argument is that any religious group that believes itself or its doctrines or founder to exist in splendid isolation from others is, I would argue, probably deluded.

### A Shared Heritage

From at least the sixteenth century onwards Western travellers to Asia started to recognize that there were startling parallels between Christianity and Asian religions, particularly Buddhism. Depending on their attitude, these travellers were either repelled or curious. A typical response among Roman Catholic missionaries was to argue that practices similar to those of the Roman Church had been taught to Asians by the Devil, as a kind of inverted satanic gospel. A Jesuit scholar, Athanasius Kircher (1602–80), wrote in 1667: 'The Devil in way of abuse hath transferred, as he hath done all the other Mysteries of the Christian Religion, the veneration which is due unto the Pope of Rome, the only Vicar of Christ on Earth, unto the superstitious Worship of barbarous peoples.'6 In a similar vein, an early edition of the Encyclopaedia Britannica, cited by John Remburg, stated: 'Lamaism, with its shaven priests, its fells and rosaries, its images and holy water, its popes and bishops, its abbots and monks of many grades, its processions

and feast days, its confessional and purgatory, and its worship of the double virgin, so strongly resembles Romanism that the first Catholic missionaries thought it must be an imitation by the devil of the religion of Christ.'<sup>7</sup>

With the progress of Asian studies over the next two centuries, generations of scholars, however committed to Christian orthodoxy, could hardly help noticing the numerous parallels, coincidences, and overlaps—in iconography, religious practice, mythology, wisdom traditions, philosophy, clothing, architecture, and numerous other fields between Christianity and other religions like Hinduism and Buddhism. This field of study was given great impetus by two important disciplines that flourished in the nineteenth century: Egyptology and anthropology. A representative of the former was Gerald Massey (1828–1907), whose work has been reconsidered in a recent book by Harpur.8 Massey's work culminated in the publication of Egypt: The Light of the World in 1907.9 He drew attention to the close parallels of saviour gods in Egyptian mythology and the account of Jesus in the Gospels, for example: birth heralded by a star; baptism by a holy man who is later decapitated; walking on water, casting out demons, healing the sick; transfiguration on a mountain; sermon on a mountain; crucifixion between two thieves; and many others.<sup>10</sup> The work of nineteenth-century anthropologists, including the renowned James Frazer's The Golden Bough, enlarged upon the theme and showed that many of the above motifs are widespread, almost universal, in some cultural areas.<sup>11</sup>

To Westerners, the closest parallels were probably not with Egyptian or other Asian cults, but with Buddhism. The celebrated Indologist Max Müller wrote more than a century ago:

That there are startling coincidences between Buddhism and Christianity cannot be denied, and it must likewise be admitted that Buddhism existed at least 400 years before Christianity. I go even further, and should feel extremely grateful if anybody would point out to me the historical channels through which Buddhism had influenced early

Christianity. I have been looking for such channels all my life, but hitherto I have found none. What I have found is that for some of the most startling coincidences there are historical antecedents on both sides, and if we once know those antecedents, the coincidences become far less startling. If I do find in certain Buddhist works doctrines identically the same as in Christianity, so far from being frightened, I feel delighted, for surely truth is not the less true because it is believed by the majority of the human race. <sup>12</sup>

So, what were the historical channels through which Buddhism influenced Christianity? I argue that this question itself needs first to be significantly expanded. Since Müller, and especially in the past twenty years, we have accumulated a vast amount of scholarship on the diffusion of material goods, cultural practices, and ideas in the ancient world—information has flowed in from linguistics, archaeology, and genetics, amongst other disciplines. With this new data, I would argue that Müller's question, though relevant, is somewhat limited and restrictive. Yes, there may well have been Buddhist influences on Christianity, either direct or indirect. To ascertain them one would,

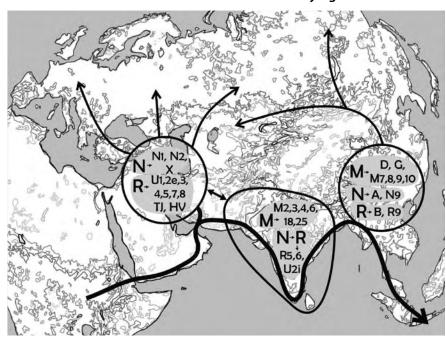
as Müller observes, ideally find evidence of 'historical channels'.

I would rather suggest that there is now evidence of a 'World Wide Web' of religiosity deeply embedded in large parts, if not the whole, of the Eurasian continent, starting in prehistory and continuing up to perhaps 500 CE. The countless myths, practices, wisdom sayings, philosophies, initiation ceremonies, saviour deities, and other elements have formed, merged, developed, flourished, decayed, and re-emerged over the vast continent from earliest times. According to this reading, what we now know as Christianity and Buddhism—as well as Hinduism, Manichaeism, and various others—were at the time of their respective emergence, important local embodiments of this pervasive religious and cultural complex.

For various reasons Buddhism and Christianity were also the two systems that became most successfully institutionalized and enshrined in texts. For historical reasons contact between the Christianity of the western end of the cultural corridor and Buddhism at the eastern end was much reduced from about the fifth to fifteenth centuries, and by the time contact was re-established the two 'separate'

# Genetic Link Underlying Cultural Network

Map of Eurasia and northeastern Africa depicting the peopling of Eurasia as inferred from the extant mtDNA phylogeny. The bold black arrow indicates the possible 'coastal' route of colonization of Eurasia by anatomically modern humans (c.60,000-80,000 ybp). Spheres depict expansion zones where, after the initial (coastal) peopling of the continent, local branches of the mtDNA tree (haplogroups given in the spheres) arose (c. 40,000-60,000 ybp), and from where they where further carried into the interior of the continent (thinner black arrows). -Metspalu et al., BMC Genetics, 5.26



religions looked quite different to one another. They had become two siblings who had grown up in different households, in faraway cities. When they met as adults they did not recognize each other as sister and brother, still less as twins; the differences were foremost, far more prominent than the fundamental relationship which they masked.

Some discussions of Buddhist influence on Christianity are rather simplistic or, to put it more strongly, in some cases misguided. For example, I find unconvincing the claims that Jesus lived in India and there studied Buddhism.<sup>13</sup> I also doubt the validity of arguments adduced by Hanson that 'Jesus was a Buddhist', partly because he seems to take as a firm starting point the historicity of Jesus as related in the Gospels, something that needs in itself to be questioned.14 There is likewise little if any undisputed evidence of direct citation of Buddhist sources in New Testament texts, though one of the most thorough studies claims to identify some; 15 and a more controversial scholar, Lindtner, makes an argument based on linguistic and cultural analysis of the New Testament and Sanskrit Mahayana texts, that some parts of the former may be 'translations' of the latter by the particular process common in the Hellenistic world of Geomatria.<sup>16</sup>

However, I would make a broader proposition that puts Müller's question in a different perspective, namely that the authors of the New Testament and the authors of the Buddhist and other religions' scriptures, and the founders of the sacred traditions of Christianity and other religions, all drew from a common stock of religiosity that was deeply rooted from India to Palestine, and beyond. So I am not so concerned to establish a chronology of direct borrowing or strict influence of A upon B; neither am I attempting here to prove or disprove theories put forward by scholars such as Campbell, Jung, and Eliade that religious beliefs and symbols may be common to different human groups because of archetypal imagery latent in the human psyche. I am rather suggesting that the now familiar institutionalized religions are crystallizations of a shared heritage. They may well have mutually influenced

each other, and perhaps, more importantly, they each partly embody an ocean of religious belief and symbolism: each is unique in its precise configuration, but far from unique in its component parts.

#### The Evidences

In discussing the ancient world, a considerable amount of new information and subsequent theory—built on advances in archaeology, linguistics, and genetics among other disciplines—has emerged in the past decade. I shall take up later the question of implications for religious believers, while in this section the focus will be on the following questions: What is the evidence of a shared heritage and connectivity throughout ancient Eurasia? Which peoples, places, and times were especially significant? What were the material bases for this ancient web?

Any one of these sub-fields is a highly specialized area with an immense amount of scholarly background; so this section is the briefest of introductions. Eurasian peoples shared a material culture based primarily on agriculture, which had developed from around 9000 BCE with the first cultivation of wheat, supplemented obviously with hunting and fishing. By about 4000 BCE we see the first establishment of permanent farms and early urban settlements, allowing work with minerals and the development of crafts, trade, and the emergence of governing structures and territorial and social control. I would recommend as a starting point, for the non-specialist, the influential work by Diamond, which summarizes recent technical evidence showing the spread of agriculture, crafts, cities, trade, writing, and governing structures from the Fertile Crescent and Egypt throughout many parts of Eurasia in the period 4000 to 1000 BCE.<sup>17</sup> Diamond highlights the role played by the cultivation of wheat, pulses, and other food items as well as the husbandry of animals such as cows, sheep, and horses. Readers are probably familiar with the argument that this kind of agriculturally-based system could flourish in territories that shared a broadly similar climate, and thus spread rapidly in

42.4 PB July 2010

the whole area from Spain to India. More technical work on this subject is provided by archaeologists and anthropologists like Sherratt. Beckwith provides an excellent recent overview. 19

Other fields of study with some relevance are linguistics and genetics, both of which suggest that there was great mobility and connectivity of peoples for the past five thousand years on this landmass though much of the debate is technical and also disputed; an example is that concerning the origin and spread of Proto-Indo-European languages, which later developed into Sanskrit, Greek, Latin, and Germanic. By the second half of the fourth millennium BCE the gemstone lapis lazuli was being traded from its only known source in the ancient world—Badakshan, in what is now northeastern Afghanistan—to as far as Mesopotamia and Egypt. By the third millennium BCE this trade extended to Harappa and Mohenjo-Daro in the Indus Valley. Archaeological evidence suggests that there was extensive trade between Egypt and India as early as 3000 BCE. The Indus Valley was also known as Meluhha, the earliest maritime trading partner of the Sumerians and Akkadians in Mesopotamia.

The Eurasian road and sea network had reached 23,000 kilometres by about 1500 BCE. Moving to historical times, in the first major unifying empire—that of Darius I the Great (c.521–486 BCE) the Persians had constructed an efficient transport system with 2500 km of 'Royal Road' in the western sector alone. By the early Roman Empire there was a vast sea and road infrastructure that included the whole of the Mediterranean, sections of northern Europe, North Africa, and reached up to India and even China, which by that time had its own empire-wide transport. During the time known as classical antiquity there were periods of chaos and disruption, but at least three high points of political and cultural stability can be identified: the empire of Persia around 500 BCE; the remarkable expansion of the Alexandrian Empire (c.300 BCE), which among other things facilitated much interaction between Greeks and Indians; and the Roman Empire, at its height around 50 CE. There were also, of course, the Mauryan and Han empires.

In short, various forms of evidence point to a world linked from China to Spain and North Africa: the first 'World Wide Web', a highly mobile, interactive network of societies connected by trade and population movement. The Web had different centres of gravity—'servers'—in different centuries, sometimes based around the huge metropolises of Alexandria or Jerusalem, Rome or Athens, Babylon or Baghdad, but the Web itself survived most of these shifts. There were few permanent communication barriers; rather, an ocean of cultural heritage—agricultural, practical, musical, mathematical, astronomical, mythological—was shared.

As regard the peoples, there are various ways to classify or categorize them: by genes—'race'—language, shared culture, shared territory, political organization. Loosely, based on linguistic families, the following were some of the major component peoples: Sumerian-Mesopotamian speakers of Akkadian and its cognate languages of south-west Asia perhaps from modern Palestine to Egypt and Saudi Arabia, many of whom spoke a variant Semitic language; speakers of Indo-European languages—India, Greece, Rome, Germany; speakers of Sino-Tibetan mainly China; and finally, speakers of Iranian, Turkish, and Central Asian languages—spread from the Bosphorus to the far borders of western China. It is interesting to note that these linguistic groups are still dominant in this mega-region today.

#### **Religious Interactions**

With evidence of such intense interaction in other aspects of life—politics, trade, warfare, all of which required interpreters and shared knowledge—it would be surprising indeed if the religious beliefs of one area developed in isolation from others. In fact, as we would expect, there are numerous pieces of evidence that a fairly pervasive, though not homogeneous, set of beliefs and practices with recognizably shared characteristics spread between North Africa and India, and beyond. There was an intricate web of religion encompassing at least parts

PB July 2010 425

of the great civilizations of Egypt, Mesopotamia, Palestine, Greece, Persia, and India. Of course, the evidence is fragmentary; partly because of the distance of time; partly because a lot of religion is conveyed by oral tradition, sometimes in private or even in secret; partly because of several deliberate campaigns to destroy heterodoxies.

Nonetheless, some rather strong examples can be identified: the presence of many western Asian myths and motifs in early Greek poetry;<sup>20</sup> North African influence in the Minoan cultures of Crete; and what McEvilley describes as 'unimpeded contact between Greece and India under Persian hegemony, 545–490 BCE' (6–12), leading for example to the doctrines of reincarnation, vegetarianism, and mystical numerology, as well as mathematics—particularly in Pythagoras, who is thought to have studied in Mesopotamia. Perhaps most significantly for philosophy, we see the widespread metaphors of idealist philosophies—that of the divine soul lost in the material world being a case in point.

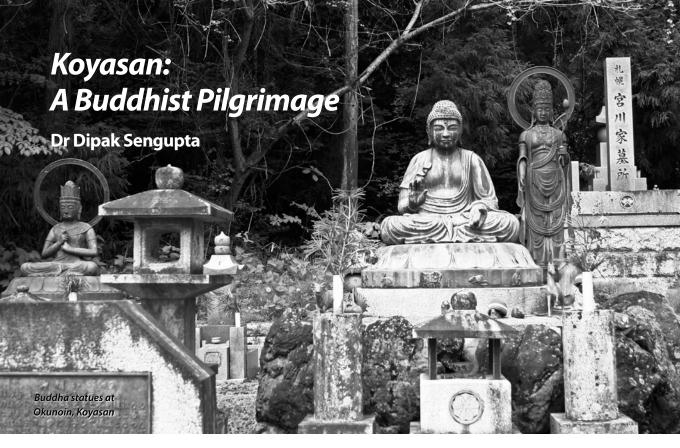
In the Hellenistic and Roman periods the extent of religious interaction was possibly far greater, and is better documented as first the Alexandrian and then Roman conquests unified the 'world' from Egypt to India through colonies, expeditions, armies, sea routes, art, and translations. Ashokan Buddhist missionaries came to the West, and at least one famous Buddhist missionary, Dharmarakshita, was himself Greek. Later theurgic movements in Hellenistic and Roman cultures combined ritual practices from Egypt and western Asia, with popular philosophy. Plotinus and other Neo-Platonist philosophers seemed to be familiar with characteristically Indian meditation traditions and mandalas (586).

(To be concluded)

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HEN OUR PLANE LANDED at the Osaka Kansai International Airport, we could see the sun set on the horizon. Everybody, including our Japanese travel agent, had warned us that it is impossible to find English speakers on Japanese roads. The statement had not struck us back home. but having landed in Japan in the evening hours it definitely was uncomfortable to think that nobody in this crowded airport would understand any word of ours. Nevertheless, the situation was not that bad. As we came out of the immigration enclosure to a large information booth, the ladies there welcomed us with an assuring smile. They did not speak fluent English but they could understand our queries and answer them, on a paper and a map, without any ambiguity, almost like an answering machine with a soft voice. We learnt where the railway station was, where and how to use the ticketing machine, and whom to contact if we faced any problem. We spent the next two weeks in Japan virtually without any verbal communication, but had no difficulty in moving around. Japan is a land of precision.

One of the ladies at the booth also confirmed that our hotel, Granvia, was right next to the Osaka railway station. She stuffed us with a bagful of maps for all possible activities. All through our tour we found the Japanese obsessed with maps. At every hotel and every information booth, whenever you have a question, you are handed a bunch of maps. There were more maps than words: maps for the country, for the city, the locality, bus routes, tourist places, hotels, night life. You name it, and there is a map for it—all freely distributed.

It took us fifteen minutes to reach Osaka railway station. As we walked out of the platform, we found ourselves at the gate of Hotel Granvia. This was such a relief. We did not have to find out the street name or check the number plate. Later on we came to know that the Japanese railways own a chain of hotels built within station complexes. We checked in and were assigned a room on the twenty-first floor.

From our room windows all that we could see was peaks of other skyscrapers across the alleys; and

PB July 2010 427

the sky had the look of narrow streams. I realized how apt the word 'skyscraper' was. Back in Kolkata the sky dominates overhead, and nothing dare scrape it! Our room was small but clinically clean, with white bedcovers on which two white kimonos had been kept. Each kimono had an origami, paper model, of a stork—symbol of good luck. It was a nice welcome gesture.

After breakfast we were again on the road with our luggage. Our destination was Mount Koya or Koyasan. Though it is one of the most popular pilgrimage sites, Koyasan is quite remote. It is the headquarters of Shingon-shu, an esoteric Buddhist sect whose teachings were systematized by Kobo Daishi, 'Great Master who understood the Dharma', more than a thousand years ago. There used to be nearly a thousand temples on Mount Koya, of which about a hundred are still functional. A few of these temples accommodate guests in traditional Japanese fashion. The guest rooms are generally an extension of the temple complex and are called Shukubo. Foreigners are usually not encouraged to stay there; the arrangement for board and lodging is so traditional that they may not find it very comfortable. The temple where we were lodged is about eight hundred years old. We had to exchange a number of e-mails before we got permission to stay there.

Japan has created an extensive railway network touching practically every possible habitation. The main corridor runs north-south, covering the major islands. Every major station is a hub for branch lines touching local stations. The services are further extended to reach remote corners. Apart from Japan Rail there are a number of private operators covering specific areas. Our first stop from Osaka was Shin-imamiya, an hour's journey. After changing trains, and travelling for another hour, we reached Gokuraku-bashi. From there we took a cable car to Koyasan station atop Mount Koya.

## The Hongaku-in Temple

We had been instructed to avail the public bus waiting at the station and get down at the fourth stop. The ticket price—¥250—was displayed on the LCD

dashboard; we dropped the coins in the box and got down with our luggage. Every instruction on the bus was in Japanese and we did not get to speak to any of the other passengers. The instruction we were carrying read: go straight, cross the road, and enter the Hongaku-in Temple, the 'Temple of Original Enlightenment'. The description fit well. We crossed the road and found ourselves in front of two granite pillars. The Japanese inscriptions they bore probably indicated the temple name. Beyond the pillars ran a driveway through a well-manicured garden with rocks, plants, and water bodies. We followed the path and went through a typical temple gate; the inlaid heavy wooden door opened onto a courtyard with a long building in the front and a temple on the left. Two huge woolly dogs—one snow white and the other jet black—were chained in a corner. As we hesitatingly approached the building, a lady greeted us. We showed her the letter our agent had given us. She looked at it, but was obviously unable to read the English. She showed us the way to a portico. Below the steps were a number of red slippers neatly lined up. We put off our shoes, changed to slippers, and sat on a bench in the corridor.

Next, a gentleman approached and greeted us in English, read the letter, and assured us that we were in the right place. This was the first time we conversed in English since we landed in Japan. Our interlocutor served as an interpreter to a group of temples. He was called in whenever required. We carried our luggage through the corridor. We were advised not to roll it, as that might damage the wooden floor. After turning a bend we stood in front of a *fusuma*, a sliding door. We took off our slippers and entered an anteroom meant for keeping luggage. There was another pair of red slippers in front of the next *fusuma*. We slipped them on, opened the sliding door, and entered the main room.

Looking beyond the room, we were left breathless. The opposite wall was a complete glass *fusuma*, from ceiling to floor; beyond were a veranda and a garden. We had only heard about the beauty of a Japanese garden and had seen some poor copies. But the real thing is so much more serene, colour-

ful, decorative, and joyous. Nature here was really a goddess—all dressed up and inviting. But there were still some formalities to be taken care of. Our interpreter informed us that dinner and breakfast would be at seven, and *upasana*, prayers, at six in the morning in the Buddha Hall, the main temple. There was an electric kettle in the room, and some teabags. There were rows of white slippers outside the privy. Food would be served in the room at the assigned hour. If we needed any help we might ask for him, the interpreter. But we were already restless to get to the garden. As soon as he left we pushed the sliding glass door aside and stepped out.

This was one of the most enchanting experiences of my life—as if I had stepped into a dream world. There was a small water body in the shape of a stream with coloured fishes swimming gaily. A small bridge over the stream and a couple of stone-crafted lamps added to the beauty. There were shrubs all around—stacked up in steps, from about a foot to about fifteen feet high. Every plant had a different colour—from yellow to rust to shades of green. There was a large rock placed just below the veranda to help step down into the garden. We walked around barefoot on the grass carpet. It was worth the trouble coming to Japan just to be in this garden.

Our interpreter had also showed us the community baths at the end of the complex—one for men and the other for women. There was an anteroom with bamboo baskets for depositing one's clothes. The main bath was a large sunken tub with hot water and jacuzzi—large enough to accommodate at least ten to fifteen persons. Along the wall were a number of taps and containers with liquid soap. I noticed later that the guests would generally go for bath in groups after dinner. I had no intention of experimenting with a community bath among people chattering in Japanese; so next day I had my bath in the afternoon when no one was around.

Our room was quite spacious, with largely bare walls on three sides. The floor was covered with a tatami mat. At the centre was a kotatsu, a low table with a heating coil, covered with a futon, a heavy blanket spread out all around. A wooden plank was



The garden behind the guest room

placed over the blanket to serve food. There were two legless chairs for guests to sit on and spread their legs beneath the table. In one corner was a niche with flowers and a hanging scroll with Japanese inscriptions. We strolled in the garden, sat on the quiet veranda, and watched the fish swimming. Everything was heavenly, till we ventured on a cup of green tea—for those unaccustomed, the smell was awful.

Dinner was served in the room at seven in the evening. We sat across the table with legs stretched under the warm blanket. Two monks dressed in black came carrying five trays each, one over the other. The temple monks wear black when on duty and gray otherwise. The trays were colourfully lacquered and shone in the light. The monks put the trays on the floor and served a bowl of rice, a cupful of soup, and a few other items on the table. The other trays were left on the floor for us to pick from. They bowed and, walking backwards, left closing the door behind them. They made sure not to show their backs while serving guests.

It was a twelve course dinner. There were items of varying shapes, sizes, and colours. Every recipe was placed in an appropriate dish. The temples serve traditional vegetarian cuisine called Shojin-ryori. It is skillfully cooked, without using any meat, fish, onion, or garlic. The dishes consisted of steamed rice, miso soup, vegetable tempura, *aghe*, Koya tofu, sweet and sour seaweeds in vinegar. Over a thousand years these recipes have been handed down from monk to monk. The sight of the dishes was unbelievably enjoyable, till I tasted some of it. But for the steamed

PB July 2010 429

rice, every item, including the soup, had a difficult taste. I filled myself only with rice. My wife was more adventurous. She tried all the items, not because she particularly liked them, but she felt that not doing so would be an insult to the cook who made these so carefully and diligently. The same drama was repeated with every meal. On the last day we were served fried brinjal, which we devoured like starving souls! Tastes clearly need to be cultivated. But I must add that the common Japanese would also have problems eating this age-old recipe; we did not have any problem enjoying meals at Japanese restaurants and food stations. Interestingly, every restaurant has plastic replicas of the food they serve. So, it is easy to select what you like and to order accordingly.

After about an hour the monks came back, cleared the table, and shifted it to one side. One of them pushed a sliding door on the wall and pulled out a huge mattress from behind it. He made our bed on the floor. The mattress was cosy and we had a good night's sleep. In the morning, when we came out of our rooms, we found that our slippers—which we had kept pointing towards the door—had been moved round to point away from the door. So, it was easy to slip them on while going out. It was very embarrassing, but the interpreter insisted that we allow the monks to do it. This was also service to God!

At six in the morning a big bell sounded aloud. It was time for chanting. We went to the Buddha Hall. The large decorated wooden door, which was closed last evening, was open now. The space up front was for guests to sit on heated carpets. There was a low wooden railing beyond which a senior monk, who was quite old, was seated on a stool. On





his right junior monks were seated on tatami mats. The room was lit with candles and the air was heavy with the smell of incense. Colourful festoons hung from the ceiling.

The room was crowded with candle sticks, metal and porcelain flower vases, and large porcelain pots filled with water. As only candles lit up the room, a shadowy environment was created. At the centre was a golden statue of Mahavairochana, 'Great Illuminator', sitting with hands folded on his lap. The farthest wall had statues of Fu-do, Maitreya or Miroku, Amitabha or Amida Buddha, and other bodhisattvas, which were in the dark. There was peace all around. The big bell sounded again and the chanting started. At the outset, deep chants of om reverberated through the hall. After three chants the bell was rung a third time and all the monks opened their books and started chanting what I presumed were sutras. It was akin to Vedic chanting, with its wave-like undulations. All the guests were swaying. Some of them also joined in the chanting. This continued for about half an hour, after which the monks left. All of us bowed. The chief monk, who was so long performing some *mudras* with fingers and hands, turned around to face us. He was an old man with wrinkled face and a soothing broad smile. He started a discourse in Japanese for us. The other guests were all listening intently with folded hands. He noticed us and kept smiling at us all the time. We did not understand a single word, but I thought we could follow what he was saying through his eyes and gestures. After the session was over we went out to see the town and the other temples.

# The Roots of Shingon-shu

Before the beginning of the Common Era, Buddhism split into two major factions. In the second—according to the Theravadins, the third—Buddhist Council convened by King Ashoka a split arose between the orthodox Vibhajyavadins, or early Theravadins, and the more liberal Sarvastivadins, who were the forerunners of future Mahayana. Members of the latter school withdrew to Mathura. By the time of Kanishka (fl. 1st cent.) the Mahayana be-

came very popular in India, came under the regular patronage of kings, gave rise to great scholars, and was big enough to have its own council. The Theravadins followed orthodox tradition covered totally by the teachings of the Tripitaka, which is primarily recorded in Pali. The Mahayana tradition depended more on later Buddhist texts, largely written in Sanskrit, that were not part of the Tripitaka. Though Mahayanists continued to revere the Tripitaka, their emphasis lay on the Vaipulya, expanded teachings. In Mahayana Buddhism becoming an arhat, who obtains liberation for oneself, is no longer an important goal as is the case with Theravadins. Rather, the ideal is the bodhisattva, who obtains deliverance for all beings. Bodhisattvas return to the earth repeatedly till their goal is achieved. In consequence, Mahayana has innumerable bodhisattvas. In Theravada belief, the Buddha is human, whereas to Mahayanists the Buddhas are *lokottara*, supra-mundane, beings whose true essence is one with Dharma.

By the second half of the first millennium, Mahayana Buddhism became esoteric and merged with Hindu tantrism to give rise to the Vajrayana. Several Mahayana sects also travelled with monks, traders, and pilgrims through Afghanistan, Central Asia, and China and ended up in Korea and Japan. Along the Silk Route, which stretches across the deserts and mountains of Central Asia and northern China. there exist many caves bearing witness to the once thriving religious movements of ancient times. In these caves and nearby settlements, numerous Buddhist scriptures—written in Sanskrit and Pali and collected and carried from India—were translated into Chinese. Much of the history of Mahayana Buddhism still lies hidden here. Only recently have some of the caves been explored and the texts regained.

I cannot resist the temptation to narrate a story, which I heard in a Japanese monastery, of a monk who travelled from India to China. He was Bodhidharma, credited with the founding of the Ch'an or Zen school. He was a great scholar and a revered teacher. He had the habit of meditating in a dark cave for days. Once while meditating he happened to doze off. This break of concentration irritated

him greatly. So he cut off his eyelids with a sword and threw them away. In time, two plants were born from these eyelids lying on the ground, and these happened to be tea plants. That is why tea became an object of veneration in China and Japan!

Ch'en-yen was one of the Mahayana sects that became popular in China around 800 CE. It was brought to Japan in the ninth century and came to be known as Shingon. It remains very popular in Japan. 'Shingon' means 'true word' or 'mantra'. This is an esoteric sect with special teachings, practices, and rituals that can only be passed from guru to disciple following a series of initiations. Initiation ceremonies are held twice a year at Mount Koya. One has to apply for it and wait for one's turn. We were told that every year several hundred thousand people receive initiation. The April initiation had taken place just before we arrived and I could not find out what really happens during an initiation. Three sutras set forth the leading ideas of Shingon: The Mahavairochana Sutra or Dainichi-kyo, the Vajrashekhara (Diamond Crown) Sutra or Kongocho-kyo, and the 'Sutra on the Act of Perfection' or Soshitsujikara-kyo. Buddha in the form of Mahavairochana is considered a protector God, though every temple has its own distinctive protector under Mahavairochana. Hongaku-in, the temple where we were staying, has Fudo-myo-o or Achalanatha—'one who never moves'—as its protector. He has a trident in his right hand and a pasha, noose, in the left. The noose is meant to pull out the five vices in the heart and the trident to destroy them. Fudo-myo-o stands in fire, which burns all bad elements.

(To be concluded)

Zen garden at Koyasan





speak about my master, Swami Brahmananda, who used to be known as 'Maharaj'. I shall confine myself to my personal experiences with him, the times I lived with him, what I received from him, what love and grace I received from him. Of course, it will be a sort of autobiography, so you will forgive me if I use the pronoun 'I' many times, but I want you to understand that this pronoun 'I' that I shall be using is not a separate individuality or ego, but this ego belongs to him whose servant I am.

Those of you who are acquainted with Ramakrishna-Vivekananda literature are well aware of what place Maharaj had in the Ramakrishna Order. He was considered by Sri Ramakrishna as one of the free souls; that is, he was born to help mankind to attain liberation. He was liberated himself from

The text of this article has been collated by Ms Edith Tipple from eight lectures given by the author at the Vedanta centres of Hollywood and Santa Barbara between 1961 and 1975.

the very beginning of his life, and he comes again and again with what we call divine incarnations to give liberation to others.

# First Meetings with Maharaj

When I was fourteen years old, I was introduced to the *Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* in its original form and original language. I was attracted to two names, the names of Naren and Rakhal. Of course, Naren was already gone; only Rakhal was living at that time. There were many other disciples living then and I had the opportunity to meet most of them. At this age also I had the opportunity to meet the Holy Mother, Sri Sarada Devi. But it was Rakhal that attracted me, the very name.

When I was sixteen years old and had graduated from high school, I came to Calcutta to study at college. I used to go to Belur Math regularly, but Swami Brahmananda was not there. About a year later I learned that he had arrived in Calcutta and would be at Belur Math. I went to visit him at Balaram Mandir, the devotee Balaram's home.

but from the stairway I saw a big crowd and left. I waited for an opportunity when he would be at Belur Math without a crowd. I took what you may call 'French leave' from college and went there on a weekday.

I saw Maharaj seated in an easy chair on the veranda upstairs, facing the room preserved in honour of Swami Vivekananda. I didn't dare approach him immediately. I felt shy, and then I thought to myself, I can stand in this corner and watch Swamiji's room. This is public property; nobody can tell me anything. So I was watching, but I was also glancing at Maharaj. He watched me for a while, and then he said, 'Come here, boy.'

The moment I prostrated, he said, 'Can you take off these stockings and place them in the sun?' He gave me the opportunity to serve him immediately. I remember the maroon-coloured stockings. I placed them in the sun; then he asked me, 'Haven't I seen you before?' 'No, Maharaj.' And that moment I felt such love, such fulfilment, in one moment. I felt, 'That was it!'

Once a disciple asked Maharaj, 'Won't you please tell us something about Sri Ramakrishna?' His answer was, 'What can I say? And how would you understand? Unless he reveals himself to you, it is not possible to understand.' I'd say the same thing about my master, that unless he reveals himself ... This was something unique with my master: whomever he accepted as a disciple, he accepted the very first moment he saw him. This I have learned from most of the disciples of Maharaj. There is that saying of Jesus: 'You have not chosen Me, I have chosen you.'

I used to visit Maharaj every Saturday and Sunday. I was studying in a college which was very puritanical; it was run by the Brahmo Samaj. They would not allow a student to go out in the evenings or stay out on Saturdays and Sundays, because these are the evenings for theatres in Calcutta and they were against anybody going to the theatre. So, when Maharaj said, 'You had better come Saturday and stay here in the evening', I said, 'But it might be difficult for me to get a leave of absence from the

principal of the college.' He said, 'Oh, just ask him; he'll let you come.'

So I wrote an application, which had to pass through the superintendent of the hostel where I was living; then I submitted it to the principal. He was very strict, very puritanical, so I was nervous. He read the letter and said, 'Correct your English.' He handed it back to me. I read and re-read it, but I couldn't find any mistake, so I went to the professor of English and asked him to correct it. He looked at it and said, 'Put a comma here.' So I put the comma and then took it back to the principal. He granted me permission immediately, without any question. That was how it was possible for me to go to Belur Math almost every weekend.

When Maharaj would rest after lunch, I'd go and give him a massage. Then I'd give Swami Turiyananda a massage. I was good at it. One day Maharaj said, 'Go give a massage to Swami Premananda.' He was lying on his bed. He would never accept personal service from anybody; that was his principle. But Maharaj sent me. I sat on his bed and began to massage his feet. He got up and said, 'Get away from me! Go to Maharaj. Get away, get away!' I said, 'Oh no, Maharaj has ordered me to give you the massage.' There was some tug of war between us for some time. You see, I was quite a young boy, seventeen years old. Then he said, 'Oh, you win!'

After two months Maharaj went away to Kankhal, to the Ramakrishna Home of Service at the foot of the Himalayas. It was during the monthlong Durga Puja vacation, and I had no intention of continuing my studies. I just ran away from college. My father had sent money for the college fee and boarding expenses, but I wrote him, 'Send my brother and pay off all these debts and take away my books.' I was going to Maharaj at Kankhal.

I broke my journey in Banaras. I thought Swami Turiyananda was there, but he was not, and I didn't know anybody. In that period there were boys with the revolutionary party, so our monasteries had to be very careful about accepting guests. The abbot was firm and said, 'No, I can't have you here. We don't know you; you might get us in trouble.'

PB July 2010 433

Then the abbot asked me, 'Have you a letter from Maharaj? Did you write to him that you were coming?' I said, 'No, I didn't let him know.' 'You must get his permission. Go back home.' I said, 'No, I'm going.' There was another young swami who took compassion on me and talked to the abbot. He let me stay there for two nights, and I took rest.

I arrived at Hardwar Station at about three in the morning. When I arrived at the ashrama it was about four o'clock, still very dark. There are so many houses in that ashrama, but somehow I went straight to one house. I didn't wish to disturb anybody, and as I was placing my blanket from my bundle at the door and was about to sit, Maharaj came out. Then his secretary came out from another door and Maharaj told him, 'Here is a brahmacharin. Make room for him.' No questions asked.

I stayed on and had a great opportunity. The young brahmacharin, who was Maharaj's personal attendant at that time, was to be engaged to learn the worship of Mother Durga, so Maharaj asked if I could take care of him for a month. Of course, I was very glad to do that. But here is my first day's experience. Maharaj asked me to ask a boy servant to draw water from the well and heat it for his bath. I was sort of jealous of this boy and said to myself, 'Why should I ask him to do that?' So I did it myself—drew water from the well, built a fire, and had it all ready—but the water was very hot. When I told Maharaj it was ready, he asked me, 'Which vessel did you use to heat the water?' I said, 'One of those.' 'Oh no, I have a special vessel for that.' So, you see, I didn't obey his first order and the whole thing was rejected. The boy servant had to do everything anyway.

This was the time I received Maharaj's grace: he initiated me. One day I was feeling hungry for Bengali sweets, which you can only get in Bengal. Maharaj said, 'You know, if you just chant the name of the Lord and wish for anything, it comes.' I was wishing for the sweets. So he chanted—he counted—and within an hour three Bengali women came with sweets of different kinds. From my boyhood I was a sort of doubting Thomas; so I approached these women and said, 'Did you tell

Maharaj that you were coming?' They said, 'No, we wanted to surprise him.' Then I asked them, 'Do you ever bring the sweets you brought this time?' 'No, this is the first time. We wanted to surprise him.' Of course, I knew he was not surprised.

After the worship of the Divine Mother, there is an immersion ceremony. It was to be in the Ganges. All the swamis went, and many boats were hired. Maharaj stood on the bank of the river and didn't go, and I stayed with him. He said, 'Aren't you going?' I said, 'No.' In the evening Maharaj had the habit of having Ganges water sprinkled on him. He would stand at the time with closed palms and think of the Lord for a length of time. That evening he wanted me to take some Ganges water from the river and sprinkle him. I took that opportunity to prostrate before him. We all consider it a very sacred occasion to prostrate before the guru by the Ganges.

I wanted to join the monastery, but he said, 'No. You had better go back home and finish your university education. Then come.' So I had to go away. And then I got mixed up with politics and joined the revolutionary movement. But I still kept in touch with the monastery and with Maharaj.

## Initial Training under Maharaj

I continued my studies. Swami Brahmananda was at Belur Math. It was the year 1914. During Christmas vacation I came again to study Vedanta with a disciple of Swami Vivekananda, Swami Shuddhananda, who was a great scholar. During that period I had no idea of joining the monastery. I had made up my mind to fight the British and get them out of the country. This swami used to argue with me; he wanted me to join the monastery. I'd argue against him, saying, 'Oh, you swamis are lazy people. You're not following what Swamiji wanted the people of this nation to do.' He couldn't convince me. Then one day an old man who used to be present during our discussions followed me when I went to prostrate before Maharaj—every morning we used to go and bow down to him. As I went this day, this old man asked Maharaj, 'When

is this boy going to join the monastery?' Maharaj was silent for a minute. He looked at me, up and down, and said, 'Whenever the Lord wills.' And all my ideas were revolutionized. Immediately I made up my mind to join the monastery. I didn't tell Maharaj anything, but I went down and told Swami Shuddhananda, 'I've joined the monastery'. He said, 'What?' 'Yes, I have joined.' 'Have you told Maharaj?' 'No.' And so I stayed on.

At that time I dragged one of my friends from the college and he also joined the monastery. And then, within a month, the brahmacharya ceremony was to be held, and all the boys who would be

given vows were asked to get permission from Swami Premananda. He looked at us and said, 'You don't have to ask any permission.' So he gave us brahmacharya after

a month.

Of this period I remember two incidents. One was that there was to be a trustees' meeting—the disciples of Ramakrishna were the trustees at the time. Swami Brahmananda was the president and Swami Premananda was the vice president; Swami Saradananda was the general secretary. The morning of the trustees' meeting Swami Saradananda, who stayed in Calcutta, came to Belur Math. When he came, I happened to be present. He asked me, 'Where is Swami Premananda?' I said, 'He's upstairs. He's gone to the shrine to meditate.' Swami Premananda did not want all these meetings, so in order to avoid this one he went to meditate in the shrine. Swami Saradananda went upstairs—I followed him—got hold of Swami Premananda, who was meditating in a seated posture, and quietly lifted him up and carried him downstairs; he just threw him into the courtyard. You know, they're full of fun, these people. And then he stood and began to dance as if in kirtan, singing a sentence from a song. Maharaj, Swami Turiyananda, Swami Shivananda, and all the disciples of Sri Ramakrishna gathered immediately from nowhere. Maharaj became the centre. They began to dance in ecstasy; they were all in ecstasy. Maharaj was improvising words and they were repeating and singing for thirty minutes or more. They had the trustees' meeting later.

Another incident I remember of that period is the following. Two young boys who joined the monastery had fought with one another. First words, harsh words, and then they came to blows. I was seated by Maharaj and Swami Premananda came to him and said,

we have for one another. Did we ever pass any harsh word between us? But you see these boys have come to blows. We must get rid of them.'

'Maharaj, you know how much love

Maharaj looked at him and said, 'They didn't come here perfect, they have come here to attain perfection. You are here

to transform their lives.' Then Swami Premananda said, 'Yes, brother, you are right.' So he went out and called all the swamis and brought them to Maharaj with folded hands: 'Maharaj, you have to bless them all.' And then he ordered them one by one to bow down before

Maharaj, who was in a great spiritual mood. He just put his hand out over the head and did something very difficult to explain.

My parents objected to my joining the monastery, but I would not go back home. They said, 'Why not come just for a little visit?' So I went. Maharaj was living in Calcutta at Balaram Mandir, and I went to see him. I had my head shaven, and the son of Balaram Babu was seated by Maharaj. Maharaj introduced me to him and he wanted to prostrate before me. I wanted to prostrate before him—you see, he was an older man. Then Maharaj got hold of me and put his hand on my shaven head and made a little fun. But, as he did so, an electric current passed through my whole being. That's all I can say. Anyhow, I went home, but it was very difficult for me to come away. I had no money, so I asked a friend to give me some. While everybody was asleep, I left the house stealthily, went to the railway station, and bought a ticket. As I got into the train, somebody dragged me down. It was my brother. He said, 'Mother is weeping. Come back and then in a few days, go.' So I had to go back. Then, mother also agreed.

Paresh Maharaj was the friend I had dragged with me to Belur Math. Maharaj asked Paresh, 'Say, what is happening to your friend?' 'He has not written me, he has not let anybody know, so I believe he's not coming back.' Maharaj said, 'No, he will be here this morning.' And, sure enough, I came that morning.

Maharaj sent me to Mayavati in the Himalayas and I was there for two years. I felt very lonely and the abbot of the monastery didn't want me to go, but I wrote to Maharaj and he gave me permission to come back. The abbot was mad at me and wouldn't give me enough money to go to Puri, where Maharaj was living. He gave me enough money to go to Calcutta and a little extra for my food. I used this little extra for my train fare and arrived at Puri, where Maharaj was.

One morning Swami Shankarananda, Maharaj's secretary, handed me a bill and said, 'Take it to the railway station and give it to the stationmaster.' On

the way I met the young brahmacharin who used to do that job. I asked him, 'This was handed to me. What am I to do?' He said, 'Oh, there's nothing to do. Just give it to the stationmaster, and when the basket comes, he will send it.' So I handed it to the stationmaster, and, as I was coming back, I approached the gate of the house. I saw all the swamis watching, waiting. Somebody asked me, 'Where is the fish?' I said, 'Fish?' Then, Maharaj's secretary took a cab and went to get the fish. It was to be cooked for Maharaj's lunch. The whole day that was the first time—Maharaj just went after me, scolding and scolding and scolding. 'He has no intelligence.' Like that, he went on. I just listened; in my heart I knew I was innocent, but I didn't say a thing. In the evening, when Maharaj and Swami Turiyananda were having their supper outside, I was fanning to keep away the insects, and Maharaj was still going on. I kept quiet. Swami Turiyananda said to me, 'Do you understand why Maharaj is scolding you?' I said, 'Frankly speaking, I don't.' Swami Turiyananda said, 'You see, the disciple is asked to do something and he does it; that's a third-class disciple. Then the disciple can read the thoughts of the guru and does it; that's a second-class disciple. Before the thought has arisen in the mind of the guru, the disciple accomplishes it; that's a firstclass disciple. Maharaj wants you to be a first-class disciple.' Then Maharaj—his comment was very interesting—said, 'Yes brother Hari, I have become very old, so they don't obey me. You pour a little intelligence into their heads.'

One day in Puri I was seated in a big hall; I saw Maharaj walking up and down. Always when Maharaj walked up and down, he would be in a very high spiritual mood. The whole monastery would vibrate. He looked very compassionately at me, and the next morning I received a letter from my mother that my father had passed away. I read the letter to Maharaj. Later, I felt that when he was walking up and down and looked at me the day before, he knew my father had died, and he was giving him liberation. That's my personal belief.

(To be continued)

# The Crimson Hibiscus: Songs for the Divine Mother

#### **Srinjay Chakravarti**

(Continued from the previous issue)

HYAMA-SANGIT OCCUPIES a unique position in the religious world, for before the Divine Mother all men and women are equal, irrespective of caste, class, creed, or community. Like Kabir's *dohas* and Sufi songs, Ramprasad's and Kamalakanta's kirtans fostered a spirit of religious tolerance. Many kirtans addressed to the Divine Mother were written by Muslims and Christians. The legendary Portuguese *kabial*, poet, Anthony Firinghee, was a leading exponent of Shakta padavali. Among Muslim devotees and mystics known to have composed Shyama-sangit, Nouazim Khan (1638–1765) was the earliest. He was followed by Ali Reza, Akbar Ali, Munshi Vilayat Hussain, Saiyyad Jaffar Khan, Hajan Reza Chaudhuri, Mirza Hussain Ali, and Muhammad Sultan.

Kazi Nazrul Islam was certainly the foremost among Muslim Kali-kirtan composers. However, recent attempts to place the kazi on a pedestal second only to Ramprasad do Shyama-sangit a disservice. Nazrul was certainly a great poet, a superb wordsmith, whose tunes and rhythms are among the finest in Bengali language even today. But a pleasing choice of diction and idiom and an elegant arrangement of harmonies alone do not make a song devotional and mystic; the most essential catalyst which transmutes a poem from a mere literary artefact into a profound devotional song is the spiritual experience of the composer. While Nazrul was a votary of Shakti and attempted difficult yogic sadhanas, he is not known to have reached the exalted spiritual heights scaled by such divine mystics as Ramprasad, Kamalakanta, or Bama Kshyepa of Tarapith.

Without complete ascension of the kundalinishakti, the 'serpent power' lying dormant at the base of the spinal cord, a spiritual aspirant does not achieve true gnosis. The songs of Ramprasad and Kamalakanta, in particular, were configured in an experiential universe; the lyrics spontaneously took root in their hearts and blossomed through their mouths, which make them so magnetic. This is the crucial difference between supreme devotees and ordinary poets and lyricists. Though Nazrul had attempted tantric meditation, his songs display a lack of familiarity with orthodox tantric precepts, leading at times to confusion in visual and descriptive imagery. No such shortcomings are obvious in the compositions of Mahendranath Bhattacharya 'Premik', Dasharathi Ray, Girishchandra Ghosh, or Dwijendralal Ray, who were poets, dramatists, and lyricists, and also sadhakas.

For instance, Girishchandra's song 'Madamatta Matangini' (The She Elephant in Rut) is stunning in its description of the goddess's glory on the bartlefield:

The brightest of suns sparkle in her toenails; on every footprint blooms a lotus; (and) blinded by the fragrant nectar humming bees follow in her wake.

Hers is an incessant wild laughter; bolts of lightning flash on her divine form a dark cloudburst, which dazzles all with light!

Again, Dasharathi Ray's song 'Jib Saja Samare' (Soul, Prepare for Battle) is extraordinary in its use of metaphors and similes:

Put on the armour of war! Look, Kala, the Lord of Death enters your own home with his arsenal of time.

Mount your chariot of virtue, harness the stallions of worship and hymn, raise your bow of knowledge and to it muster your arrows of devotion.

Sri Ramakrishna had sung this song to console a devotee whose son had recently died.<sup>9</sup>

Premik's songs too are remarkable in their devotional appeal, such as this song on samsara's cycle, 'O Ma Kali Chirakal-i' (Forever, O Mother Kali):

Sometimes on land and in the wind, sometimes in the sky and in the nether world, sometimes in the ocean waters, you dress me up in diverse forms.

I have traversed endless climes cast in endless guise yet this (play) never ends; bravo, to you Mother!

Ramlal Das Dutta was another great composer whose song 'Mago Shmashan Bhalabashish Bale' (Because You Love the Crematorium, Mother) is still widely cherished:

Mother Shyama, I know you love the pyres where corpses burn. That is why I have turned my heart into a burning-ground for you to dance forever.

No desires are left in my mind, only flames of the pyre burn in my thoughts; and I have filled the four corners with ashes hoping that you might come.

In this we find an echo of Swami Vivekananda's 'And Let Shyama Dance There':

Shattered be little self, hope, name, and fame Set up a pyre for them and make thy heart A burning-ground. And let Shyama dance there.<sup>10</sup>

#### Sri Ramakrishna's Devotees

The golden age of Shyama-sangit ended with Mahendranath Bhattacharya and Ramlal Das Dutta. The composers who followed in their footsteps, such as Dilip Ray and his associate Nishikanta, could not attain the heights achieved by their predecessors. With the advent of lyricists who wrote for popular films and gramophone records, the genre became increasingly commercialized.

The spiritual flame was however kept burning by monks of the Ramakrishna Order, such as Swamis Tapananda, Nirvedananda, Ambikananda, and Chandikananda, who also composed sublime songs for Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi and thereby introduced a new element into the broader framework of Matri-sangit. Swami Chandikananda composed several songs in the traditional Kali-kirtan style; his memorable 'Murta Ajike Mrityurupini' (Today, Death Personified) is dazzling in its fireball burst of words and images:

The fires of annihilation blaze in her three eyes, a furious storm thunders thick!

Saviour of gods, destroyer of demons, save me, Mother, your eternal suppliant!

The names of several householder devotees of Sri Ramakrishna are also immortalized in the annals of Shyama-sangit. Girishchandra Ghosh is the foremost among them. Others include Kalipada Ghosh 'Dana Kali', Sadhu Nag Mahashay, Debendranath Mazumdar, and Giribala Devi. Several of Sri Sarada Devi's devotees also wrote Kali-kirtans and bhajans. Prominent among such householder devotees is Surendranath Chakraborty, remembered for his prayer song 'Paran Khule Shabai Mile' (Let Everybody Join with Open Hearts):

Let everybody join with open hearts and call upon Mother but once; the call will resonate in my Mother's heart and she will come at once.

Let us together with devotion sing, 'Come, come, my mother, come'; if all of us together call, can she stay ever afar?

This song is as much a paean to the goddess Chandi as it is a cry from the soul to the Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi.

#### **Cultural Constructs**

There are two separate and distinct streams of Shyama-sangit, though at certain times they mingle with each other. The primary stream, which leads to the path of the highest realization, is the genre in its pristine glory. This includes the compositions of highly advanced spiritual sadhakas such as Ramprasad and Kamalakanta. Bama Kshyepa is also said to have created such songs for Ma Tara. Arguably, the last major name in this tradition is Bhaba Pagla. The other stream comprises songs written by professional poets, playwrights and dramatists, kings, princes, zamindars and wazirs, film and popular lyricists, and various householder devotees. Scions of royal dynasties usually based their verses on the martial exploits of Mother Kali and Durga, as inspired by the Chandi. Banwarilal Ray's 'Ohe Maharaj, Aj Ki Heri Nayane?' (O King! What Do We See Today?) could be cited as an instance:

O King! What do we see today? Who is this maiden with dishevelled tresses who roars and dances in the gory battlefield? ... A garland of severed heads swings round her neck, and blood drips from her teeth!

Interestingly, Maharaja Krishnachandra of Nadia was Ramprasad's patron, while Kamalakanta was the royal pandit at the Burdwan court. In this way, Shyama-sangit broke down the barriers between classes, between rich and poor, monarchs and mendicants, princes and beggars, devotees and dacoits. It demonstrated how the Divine Mother of the universe is equally the mother of all men and women, in the same way as Sri Sarada Devi expressed that she was the mother of the good and the mother of the bad, of the saint and of the sinner.

It is also a peculiar aspect of Bengali Shyama-sangit that almost all its composers were men. That such compositions to the primal feminine Power were done mainly by men speaks volumes about the oppression of women in Indian society. Among the few songs produced by women that can still be found are those by Sri Anandamayi Ma. There is also a record of Giribala Devi having composed songs for Ma Kali, such as 'Harahridi-padme Mayer' (In Mother's [Feet] on the Lotus of Shiva's Heart). She and her daughter Gauri-Ma were both devotees of

The late nineteenth century saw a paradigm shift in Shyamasangit compositions. While earlier *kabiyals* and *jatrawalas*, folk dramatists, such as Dasharathi, Bhola Moira, Rasikchandra Ray, Madan Master, and Nilkantha had incorporated mystic songs in commercial plays, later professional dramatists, playwrights, and

Sri Ramakrishna.11



poets composed songs of this type as part of their everyday praxis. Nevertheless, these were not without the riches of bhakti—the songs of Dwijendralal Ray and Rajanikanta Sen being typical examples.

Around this time was inaugurated a new trend of somewhat abstract songs, possibly under Brahmo influence, in which Jagat-janani, the mother of the universe, was worshipped without identifying her with any specific deity such as Durga, Kali, or Tara. An enduring example of this is Rabindranath Tagore's 'Bara Asha Kare Eshechhi Go' (With Great Expectation Have I Come). But it is important to note that there would have been no Rajanikanta or Trailokyanath without the legacy of Ramprasad, Nareshchandra, and Kamalakanta.

Another trend that emerged with the forward march of the struggle for India's freedom was the identification of the motherland with the Divine Mother of the universe to inspire nationalistic fervour. Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay even made explicit such identification of Bharat Mata with the cult of the Devi in 'Vande Mataram' (Adoration to Mother), India's national song: 'Tvam hi durga dasha-praharana-dharini; you are Durga, the bearer of ten weapons.' This song is part of the celebrated novel Anandamath, which drew upon the sannyasin insurrection of Bengal of 1773.

Many leading Bengali poets of that generation expressed their veneration for Mother Chandi. One of them was Satyendranath Dutta, the 'Wizard of Rhythm', whose devotion to the goddess is evident in the classic poem 'Singhabahini' (Lion-rider). Rabindranath Tagore even included a paean to Ma Kali—'Ulangini Nache Rana-range' (The Naked Woman Dances in Battle)—in one of his plays in which he describes her as the dancing deity:

The naked woman dances in battle. And we all dance with her.

Clad only in space, she darkens all sides, like a flame of fire, burns her scarlet tongue ... Her black tresses fly in the sky, the sun and moon hide in fear, [and] streams of bright blood flow down her black body.

Most of such master poets, however, approached Shyama-sangit as a mere cultural artefact, where the terribilità of Mother Kali is viewed from the standpoint of contemporary European observers, who saw the image as being representative of an exotic India. It was only in the songs of a handful of Hindu poet-devotees, who were also leading personalities in their respective professional fields, that the supreme esoteric philosophy of the tantras was genuinely exemplified. The names of Ishwarchandra Gupta, Nabinchandra Sen, Ashutosh Mukhopadhyay, and Gopeshwar Bandyopadhyay are notable in this group of savants. Many of them also composed songs sisterly to Shyama-sangit: Vijaya, Agamani, and others connected with the autumnal Durga Puja festival. These songs are inextricably entwined with the Bengali socio-cultural milieu. Depicting Parvati's return to her father Himalaya's abode, they incorporate the dynamics of familial and gender relationships with their natural affections and frictions.

Kali-kirtans and other paeans to Goddess Chandi, which together comprise the gamut of Shakta *padabalis*, cannot be viewed in isolation from the wider genre of Matri-sangit. These must also be viewed in the context of the later development of hymns in homage to Sri Sarada Devi; these verses bear the legacy of the pristine Matrigathas, of which Kali-kirtans are the most popular variety. Devotional songs to Ma Kali are still inseparable from the daily lives of Bengali folk. M, Mahendranath Gupta, had once observed that such devotional songs enable us 'to worship the eternal with the ephemeral'. 'Whatever (talent or possession) one has, one must to offer to God. If it is heartfelt, it will lead to God-vision.'<sup>12</sup>

The image of Kali reconciles in one and the same form the terrific aspect of nature and the benevolent Divine Mother bestowing boons to her children. Again, in Mahendranath Gupta's words: 'In the image of Ma Kali, all three states—creation, preservation and destruction—find expression. Her meditation mantra visualizes her as a woman in her full youth. Her state is like that of a woman

just before giving birth to her first child—firm erect breasts heavy with milk. This is representative of creation. Again, with her right hands she grants boons and freedom from fear. This is a sign of preservation of the cosmos. Without the Mother's blessings, the child cannot survive. The garland of severed heads, the lolling tongue, the sharp sword, the inflamed eyes, and the deep dark complexion—these indicate destruction. This is suggestive of *tamas*, which causes destruction' (12.36).

As the loving Mother, she presides over the harmonization of classes, communities, cultures, and religions. Her songs have been written and sung by all Bengalis, including robbers and dacoits—the thuggee cult, in which dacoits worshipped the goddess Kali and sacrificed human victims, was also prevalent in Bengal. However, the tradition of Shyama-sangit, in which Ma Kali is worshipped through devotion and an artistic attitude, has endured through centuries.

A very common metaphor in Shyama-sangit is that of the crimson hibiscus, a flower particularly important in Mother worship. Nazrul wrote famously in 'Bal re Jaba Bal' (Tell Me, O Hibiscus):

Tell me, O hibiscus, Through what devotion did you obtain the bright red feet of Mother Shyama?

Girishchandra sang 'Mutho Mutho Ranga Jaba' (Handfuls of Red Hibiscus):

Who has poured handfuls of bright red hibiscus flowers at your feet, O Ma?

Kamalakanta had used such floral imagery to create a beautiful effect in 'Majla Amar Man Bhramara' (My Mind's Honeybee Is Enthralled):

My mind's honeybee is enthralled by the blue lotus of Shyama's feet. The honey of mundane pleasures are rendered worthless, as are all flowers of passion and the like. This trend of thought was replicated later in Buddhadev Bhattacharya's 'Ranga Jabay Kaj Ki Ma (What Use Is a Crimson Hibiscus, Mother):

What use is a crimson hibiscus, Mother under your sun-bright feet?
The light of a trillion dawns glows dispelling darkness there!

The hibiscus flower, which has no fragrance but is brilliantly sanguine, signifies the purest devotion of the human heart unalloyed with the perfumes of worldly aspirations. Among the most famous songs denoting this concept is Dwijen Chaudhuri's 'Amar Mayer Payer Jaba' (The Hibiscus at My Mother's Feet), immortalized by the legendary Pannalal Bhattacharya:

Blossom like the hibiscus at my Mother's feet, O mind. It may have no fragrance, but what it has is no gimcrack ornament. ...

Don't forget how your merciful Mother, in her blood-smeared black form, washes away the soul's blackness—that is why, I say, come let us surrender ourselves at her scarlet feet.

#### Transcendental Realization

Such songs, which allegorize the human mind as a floral offering at the feet of the Divine Mother, only go to prove that Shyama-sangit is not merely a socio-cultural phenomenon or just a euphonic instrument for disseminating popular culture. The great singer and musicologist Gopeshwar Bandyopadhyay had once asserted: 'It is very necessary to popularize traditional devotional songs because by cultivating these, it helps awaken religious fervour in the masses.'

This is because, as Swami Lokeswarananda pointed out, 'Instead of a great deal of words, a line or a strophe from a poem or a song is often more successful in expressing a mood. In Sri Ramakrishna's voice, these words became even more vibrant, even more simple. The deepest perceptions

can never be expressed through language. Through verse or music, a little of it may sometimes find expression. What the sadhaka experiences in the core of his or her being, can that ever be explained to others? Yet, it suddenly manifests itself as melody and rhythm through the sadhaka's voice.'13

The dissemination of Shyama-sangit in its traditional, pristine form has acquired a greater urgency today, at a time when the Hindu religion is being increasingly commercialized and politicized. With the commodification of spiritual values in twentyfirst-century India, the newer popular songs on Ma Kali and Ma Durga in cassettes and CDs have trivialized the original ethos of pure devotion, love, and ecstasy. This unfortunate trend cannot be viewed in isolation from the prevalent sociocultural milieu. This is a time when the Mahavidyas of Adyashakti are being widely propitiated in many parts of eastern India, particularly Bengal, by bogus tantrics, Kapalikas, astrologers, black magicians, and sundry other charlatans for the pursuit of trivial and mundane aims.

The ideal of motherhood as established by Sri Ramakrishna and embodied in Ma Sarada Devi can save our society from this insidious curse. Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda had condemned Vamachara in no uncertain terms, but those sordid tantric practices and rituals of the nineteenth century have been returning in disguise among the masses over the last two decades. The worship of the Divine Mother through a pure and unadulterated devotion and with a mind simple and unadorned like the crimson hibiscus of 'Amar Mayer Payer Jaba' is the way out. Shyamasangit is the pathway to the highest realization, as shown by mystics such as Ramprasad, Bama Kshyepa, and Sri Sitaramdas Omkarnath, who, like Sri Ramakrishna, have held up the ideal of worshipping God as Mother.

Kali-kirtans are of course priceless as cultural expressions, but they are something else: incredibly precious stepping stones to God-realization. The worship of the Divine Mother yields the fruits of *chaturvarga*—dharma, artha, kama, moksha—

all that one wants in this samsara. Sakama bhakti, devotion motivated by worldly gains, may yield temporary results, but ultimately is spiritually deleterious.

In his book on Ramprasad, Swami Vamadevananda says: 'The way of *pravritti* takes human beings towards worldly enjoyment. By enjoying all the pleasures of the perishable world, humans slowly descend to lower paths and in the end the fruits are poisonous. The path of *nivritti* slowly takes humans towards renunciation and makes us realize how trivial the enjoyment of pleasures in this ephemeral samsara is.'14

To recall Ramprasad's warning in his song 'Janani Padapankaja' (Mother, Your Lotus Feet), the lotus feet of the Divine Mother should not be worshipped for trivial pursuits or mundane pleasures, nor to avert the sorrows and pains of our daily lives, because through her feet we can gain the highest form of realization and even nirvana.

The name of Durga, sweet as nectar, is only for attaining *kaivalya*— a person trapped in delusion and nescience chants the name to escape the troubles, trials, and tribulations of samsara; he rots in a poisonous pit, says Ramprasad, I know: such devotion is always fruitless.

#### **Notes and References**

- 8. See, for instance, Shivasaumya Biswas, 'Shyamasangiter Uttaradhikar o Nazrul' in *Matrishakti*, 8/2 (Kolkata: Dakshineswar Kalimandir and Debottar Estate, 2008), 34.
- 9. Sri Sri Ramakrishna Lilaprasanga, 1.3.22.
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# The Poetic Philosophy of Ramcharitmanas

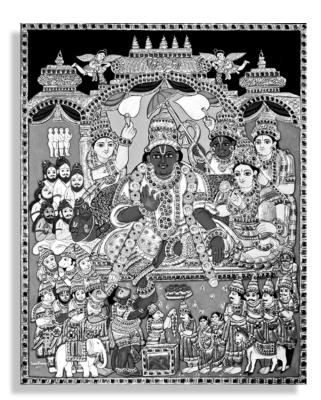
#### **APN Pankaj**

(Continued from the previous issue)

#### Adhikārin: The Competent Reader

AVING DELINEATED the three anubandhas, adjuncts, of his work-viṣaya, **L** subject-matter, *sambandha*, relationship or association (of the subject matter with the text), and prayojana, purpose—we have now to examine the fourth adjunct, the adhikārin, the person qualified to comprehend the text. Tulsi's Ramcharitmanas has three narrators and three jijñāsus, inquisitive listeners: Yajnavalkya narrates the tale to Bharadwaja, Shiva to Parvati, and Kakabhushundi to Garuda. Together they form a triad. It is interesting to note that in this triad seer speaks to seer, deity to deity, and bird to bird. Also, through this triad, the poet has symbolically covered bhūḥ, the earth, bhuvaḥ, space, and svab, heavens—the respective regions of sages, birds, and gods—as the domain of Manas. Tulsi says, this 'beautiful narrative was composed by Shiva and later, out of compassion, he shared it with Uma. Kakabhushundi received it and gave it to Yajnavalkya, and Yajnavalkya in turn gave it to Bharadwaja'.<sup>24</sup> How Kakabhushundi imparted this narrative to Garuda is another interesting episode (7.58.8-69). Tulsi heard this kathā from his guru. He was then a child and therefore did not quite understand it. The guru nevertheless narrated it repeatedly and 'I comprehended it a little within the limitations of my wit. This I now proceed to compose in vernacular' (1.30 (ka), 31.1). He later describes the logic of the name Ramcharitmanas:

Raci mahesa nija mānasa rākhā; Pāi susamau sivā sana bhāṣā.



Tāten rama-carita-mānasa bara; Dhareu nāma hiyan heri haraṣi hara.

After (finishing the) composition, Shiva preserved it in his *mānasa*, heart and mind, and when an opportunity presented itself, narrated it to Parvati. Therefore, after due thought (in his *mānasa*), he happily gave it the name *Ramcharitmanas* (1.35.6).

This is the *guru-śiṣya paramparā*, lineage of preceptors and pupils, of *Manas*. On carefully considering the dialogues between each couple of the triad and the related observations of the poet at respective points, one cannot but agree that the *jijñāsus* are eminently qualified disciples, true *adhikārins*. They indeed are the self-confessed sufferers, scorched by the heat of doubt and delusion, and eager to hear the *rāma-kathā*. For Tulsi's own listeners or readers of *Manas*, he spells out the qualifications of the persons who should be permitted access to it:

Rāma-kathā ke tei adhikārī; Jinha ke sata-sangati ati pyārī.

Guru-pada prīti nīti-rata jeī; Dvija-sevaka adhikārī teī. Tā kahan yaha biseṣi sukhadāī; Jāhi prāna-priya śrī-raghurāī.

Rāma-carana rati jo caha athavā pada nirbāna; Bhāva sahita so yahi kathā karau śravana puṭa pāna.

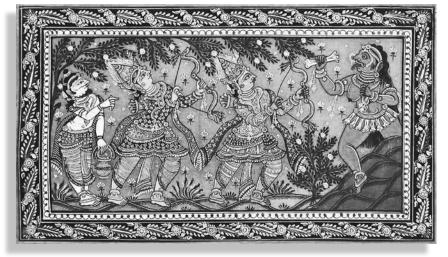
Qualified to listen to  $r\bar{a}ma$ - $kath\bar{a}$  are the persons who ardently love the company of saints, are fond of (have reverence for) the guru's feet; are wedded to moral principles and are of service to the twiceborn. To them who love Sri Rama more than their life's breath, this  $r\bar{a}ma$ - $kath\bar{a}$  is particularly delightful (7.128.3–4). One who is desirous of inculcating deep devotion to Sri Rama's feet or attaining to the state of final liberation should, through the cavities of one's ears, drink it reverentially (7.128).

#### Tulsi's Humility

Tulsi does not care for technique and poetic embellishment in itself, thereby implicitly denying predominant status to the *rīti* and *alaṅkāra* schools. He even mildly chides the seventh-century scholar Bhamaha—the author of *Kavyalankara* who had said, '*Na kāntam-api nirbhūṣaṁ vibhāti vanitā mukham*; stripped of ornaments, even the fair face of a damsel does not shine'—by retorting:

Bhaniti bicitra sukabi-kṛta joū; Rāma nāma binu soha na soū. Bidhu-badanī saba bhānti sanvārī; Soha na basana binā bara nārī.

Rama and Lakshmana in battle



Saba guna rahita kukabi-kṛta bānī; Rāma nāma jasa aṅkita janī. Sādara kahahin sunahin budha tāhī; Madhukara sarisa santa gunagrāhī.

Just as a moon-faced damsel fully adorned with ornaments does not look attractive if naked, similarly a poem possessing a variety of virtues and composed by a good poet does not bear grace without Rama's name. A poem, despite being shorn of all qualities, and composed by a bad poet, is yet heard respectfully by the noble sages if it is marked by the glory of Rama's name, because saints collect the essence just as a honeybee collects the *rasa* from flowers (1.10.2–3).

Tulsi says that in the opinion of connoisseurs, the poetry of a good poet is born at one place but finds adornment elsewhere, indicating that a poet's composition requires the discerning ear or eye of a sensitive person who may ponder over its implicit and explicit meaning, purport, poetic beauty, thought content, ideology, technique, and above all, the rasa intrinsic to it. This, he says, is comparable with gems, rubies, and pearls: so long as they remain on the head of a serpent or an elephant, or hidden in the hills, they do not look as beautiful as they really are. When, however, they adorn the crown of a king or the body of a youthful maiden, they attain multifold enhancement of their beauty (1.11.1–2). Continuing in the same vein, he says: 'When the poet remembers Sarada devotedly, she leaves the house of Brahma and comes running to

him (the poet). The fatigue occasioned by this running (to reach the poet) cannot be relieved unless she has a dip in the lake of *rāma-carita*. If the poet sings the exploits of ordinary mortals, she beats her brow and repents why she came at all. Realizing this in their hearts, the sagepoets sing the glory of Hari, which washes off the stench and squalor of the Kali Yuga'

(1.11.2-4). 'Sages compare the heart with the ocean, the intellect with the oyster shell, and Sarada with the star Swati, Arcturus. If, says the poet, a shower of lovely ideas descends—in the form of a poet's writing—under the influence of this star, the poem shines like a beautiful pearl (1.11.4-5). Pierced dexterously and strung together in the thread of Sri Rama's exploits and worn around the limpid hearts of noble souls, these shine in the glow of their abundant love' (1.11).

This, therefore, is Tulsi's view of an exalted poem. In the beginning, the poet expresses his many limitations, considering the challenge and enormity of the task he has set his heart upon. This expression betrays not just humility, but a bit of trepidation as well.

Tulsi augmented his outstanding poetic skills with deep study of a diverse variety of scriptures and classics, as can be gathered from the allusions made in *Manas* and his other works. In particular, his knowledge of the literature on Sri Rama—Puranic and otherwise—is amazing. His scholarship and versatility are indeed proverbial. And yet,

Nija budhi bala bharosa mohi nāhīn; Tāten binaya karaun saba pāhīn. Karana cahaun raghupati guna gāhā; Laghu mati mori carita avagāhā. Sūjha na ekau anga upāū; Mana mati ranka manoratha rāū. Mati ati nīca ūnci ruci āchī; Cahia amia jaga jurai na chāchī. ... Bhāga choṭa abhilāṣa baḍa.

I am not confident of the strength of my own judgement; therefore, I supplicate you all. I wish to recount the virtues of Raghupati; (however) my intellect is feeble and his exploits profound. I cannot hit upon even one recourse; my mind and comprehension are paupers, but my ambition is royal. Lowly is my intelligence, but good and sublime is my taste. I yearn for ambrosia, but fail to get even buttermilk in this world (1.8.2–4). ... My fortune is humble, but ambition high ...<sup>25</sup>

He has earlier propitiated them all—deities, saints, preceptors, poets, villains, natural phe-

nomena, animate and inanimate beings of the nether world, water, earth, skies and heavens—and now makes a request to be rescued, to be forgiven for his audacity, and to be listened as parents happily listen to the stuttering of their child. It is not that he is unaware of his learning; more appropriately, he is not conscious about it. He has himself alluded to it by saying that he has brought together 'nānā-purānanigamāgamāsammatam yad rāmāyane nigaditam kvacid-anyato'pi; what accords with the different Puranas, Vedas, and Agama, philosophical treatises, and what has been expounded in the Ramayana (of Valmiki) and also elsewhere' (1. invocatory verse 7). And he follows it up later with:

Muninha prathama hari-kīrati gāī; Tehi maga calata sugama mohi bhāī.

Ati apāra je saritabara jaun nṛpa setu karāhin; Caḍhi pipīlikau parama laghu binu śrama pārahi jāhin.

Sages were the first to sing Hari's glories. I find it easy to tread that path (1.13.5). When a king has a bridge constructed on a great river, even an ant goes across without much effort (1.13).

Earlier, he had said:

Kabi na houn nahi bacana prabīnū; Sakala kalā saba bidyā hīnū.

I am neither a poet nor a weaver of words. Of all arts and sciences I am deprived (1.9.4).

Kabi na houn nahin catura kahāvaun.

I am not a poet, nor am I known for my intelligence (1.12.4).

Akhara aratha alaṅkṛti nānā; Chanda prabandha aneka bidhānā. Bhāva-bheda rasa-bheda apārā; Kabita doṣa guna bibidha prakārā. Kabita-bibeka ek nahin moren; satya kahaun likhi kāgada koren.

There are letters and words and meanings, figures of speech and styles galore, varieties of metres and compositions, countless divisions of *bhāvas* and *rasas*, and many a virtue and deficiency of poetry.



Rama Chastises the Dying Vali, Sub-imperial Mughal Painting from Agra (c.1595)

Of all of them I have no discriminatory sense. This truth I am prepared to write in black and white (1.9.5-6).

And with all these self-confessed failings and frailties, he yet persists with singing the virtues of Sri Rama in accordance with his wit:

Mati anurūpa rāma-guna gāvaun (1.12.5).

Tulsi was certainly aware of the arrogance of many of his predecessors and contemporaries. Moreover, poetic *darpokti*, proud statements, were treated as an accepted part of literature. Yet, arrogance is neither a virtue nor a strength. Compared to virtually all other poets of his time, including some of the bragging Sanskrit poets, Tulsi's strength as poet and scholar is far superior and has stood the test of time. At the same time, we cannot say that his humility is some kind of a mask, a ploy, or even a defence mechanism; he was quite capable of sharp statements:

Etehu para karihahin te asankā; Mohi ten adhika je jaḍa-mati rankā.

(In spite of my foregoing confessions,) if some people still nurse doubts, they are more thick-headed and bankrupt of intelligence than I am (1.12.4).

One of the very interesting passages of *Manas* is his left-handed complement to detractors and fault-finders, where he uses *śleṣa*, pun, with aplomb (1.4. 1–6). However, Tulsi is above all a bhakta whose natural and ingrained humility does not let him accept even his being so—leave alone all other qualities:

Bañcaka bhagata kahāi rāma ke; Kirikara kañcana koha kāma ke. Tinha mahan prathama rekha jaga morī; Dhīnga dharama-dhvaja dhandhraka dhorī.

I occupy the first position in the line of those impostors who, though slaves of gold, lust, and anger, claim to be Rama's devotees and are, in fact, unscrupulous hypocrites carrying the flag of righteousness (1.12.2).

A strong statement indeed, even by the standards of high personal humility. But it is in keeping with the true Vaishnava tradition of *dainya*, servility. This is what Sri Yamunacharya, Sri Ramanujacharya's preceptor, has to say:

Na dharma-niṣṭho'smi na cātmavedī na bhaktimāns-tvac-caraṇāravinde; Akiñcano'nanya-gatiś-śaraṇya tvat-pāda-mūlaṁ śaraṇaṁ prapadye. Na ninditaṁ karma tadasti loke sahasraśo yanna mayā vyadhāyi; So'haṁ vipākāvasare mukunda krandāmi sampratya-gatis-tavāgre.

I am not settled in dharma, nor wise in the knowledge of the Self. To your lotus feet I do not have devotion, I am utterly destitute and without any recourse; (hence) I seek refuge at your feet. There is no loathsome act that I have not performed a thousand times. Now, when their consequences stare me in the face, I, having no other recourse, cry before you.<sup>26</sup>

And this is Sri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu's advice:

Tṛṇād-api sunīcena taror-api sahiṣṇunā; Amāninā māna-dena kīrtanīyaḥ sadā hariḥ.

The only action worth performing is to sing the name of Hari always, while remaining humbler than a blade of grass, more tolerant than a tree, and respectful of others though not seeking honour.<sup>27</sup>

But presently, confidence springs up, as faith in the grace of Bhagavan Shiva asserts itself, and Tulsi calls himself the poet of *Ramcharitmanas*:

Sambhu prasāda sumati hiyan hulasī; Rāma-carita-mānasa kabi tulasī.<sup>28</sup>

Tulsi attributes all his wisdom, wit, and poetic genius to Parvati and Shiva, whom he considers his guru, mother, and father:

Guru pitu mātu mahesa bhavānī;
Pranavaun dīna-bandhu dina-dānī.
Sevaka svāmi sakhā siyapī ke;
Hita nirupadhi saba bidhi tulasī ke.
So umesa mohi para anukūlā;
Karihi kathā muda mangala mūlā.
Sumiri sivā siva pāi pasāū;
Baranaun rāma-carita cita cāū.
Bhaniti mori siva-kṛpā bibhātī;
Sasi-samāja mili manahun surātī.

I reverence Mahesha and Bhavani, who are my guru, mother, and father; they are the helpers of the poor and daily look after their needs. I am confident that the Lord of Uma, who is the servitor, master, and friend of Sita's consort is my sincere benefactor in every way and, being gracious to me, shall make this *kathā* a source of joy and auspiciousness. I remember Parvati and Shiva, and having received their blessings enthusiastically proceed to narrate Rama's story. My composition is well-adorned with Shiva's grace, just as the beautiful night is lit up by the moon and the stars (1.15.2,44–5).

The humble and meek Tulsi seems to be saying, 'Guilelessly surrender your wisdom and skills, along with your being, at the feet of Rama and Shiva, to

whom they really belong, and then proceed with your work with the confidence that they are with you and will own responsibility for it. If your work bears Rama's name and is infused with his glory, it will endear itself to the hearts of the laity and the literati alike, no matter what weaknesses of style, diction, technique, rhythm, or resonance, it has.'

This poetic viewpoint of Tulsi propounded in *Ramcharitmanas* has proved that if there is one *nirdoṣa kāvya*, flawless poem, at least in Hindi, which continues to sway the sentiments of India while carrying the exalted message rooted in her cultural ethos, that poem is *Ramcharitmanas*. Rightly has Jordens said:

It is the favourite book of a hundred million people, for many of whom it is their main source of religious inspiration. ...

Tulsi's incalculable influence on Hinduism in north India was threefold. He inspired an intense devotion to Rāma that touched upon every aspect of life, and made Gāndhī cry 'He Rām!' as he died under the assassin's bullet. Tulsīdās inculcated a high sense of morality, and of kindness in human relationships. And he proved a great force in strengthening the structures of the *Sanātana Dharma* at a time when both Islam and the many iconoclastic sects were threatening it seriously. In this last his stature is no smaller than that of the great Śankara himself.<sup>29</sup>

Ānanda-kānane hy-asmiñ-jangamas-tulasī taruḥ; Kavitā-mañjarī yasya rāma-bhramara bhūṣitā.

In this forest of bliss, there is the mobile Tulsi tree, the poetic blossoms of which are adorned by Rama, the honeybee.

—Madhusudana Saraswati 🤇

#### **Notes and References**

- 24. Ramcharitmanas, 1.30.1-3.
- 25. 1.8. These verses bear comparison with Kalidasa, *Raghuvamsha*, 1.2–4.
- 26. Sri Yamunacharya, Stotraratna, 22-3.
- 27. Sri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu, Shikshashtaka, 3.
- 28. Ramcharitmanas, 1.36.1.
- 29. A Cultural History of India, 275-7.

### Vedanta-sara

#### Swami Bhaskareswarananda

(Continued from the previous issue)

#### **Chapter II—Superimposition**

# 32. Asarpa-bhūtāyām rajjau sarpāropavat vastuni avastvāropaḥ adhyāropaḥ.

Adhyāropa is the superimposition of the unreal on the real, like the false perception of a snake in a rope, which is not a snake.

THE REAL OBJECT IS THERE, but to project mother, father, we, he, and so forth on it is called 'superimposition'.

# Vastu—Saccidānandam-advayam brahma; ajñānādi-sakala-jada-samūho'vastu.

Reality is Brahman, which is without a second and is Existence, Consciousness, and Bliss. Unreality is nescience and all other material objects.

Now, what is Reality? God is the only Reality. Man, woman, money, father, mother, and the like, and the reactions towards them are all unreal. God alone is real.

First of all the illusion of a snake in the rope is produced. Then, it develops further elaborations in various forms and reactions—the snake's head and tail appear, as does its hissing, and the associated fear. Actually, there is no father. He was not there before birth and will not be after death. Yet, due to illusion, he appears real. When illusion lessens, our bodies do not shine so prominently in our

The text comprises the edited notes of Swami Bhaskareswarananda's classes on *Vedanta-sara*, conducted between 8 December 1954 and 20 January 1955. The notes—taken down by some residents of the Ramakrishna Math, Nagpur—have been edited and reconstructed by Swami Brahmeshananda, Secretary, Ramakrishna Mission Ashrama, Chandigarh.

consciousness. In fact, there is nothing gross or fine, and God is the only Reality. But leaving aside God, we see gross modifications—face, nose, beauty, and the like; this is 'superimposition' and its removal is 'de-superimposition'.

Every aspirant must know four things: (i) the nature of *ajñāna*, ignorance; (ii) the nature of jiva, individual being; (iii) the nature of Ishvara, God; and (iv) the nature of Brahman. Be watchful of the signs of ignorance within yourself: ego, passion, anger, lust, attachment, and the like.

#### 34. Ajñānaṁ tu sad-asadbhyāmanirvacanīyaṁ triguṇātmakaṁ jñānavirodhi bhāvarūpaṁ yat-kiñcid-iti vadanty-aham-ajña ityādy-anubhavāt 'devātma-śaktiṁ svaguṇair-nigūḍhām' ityādi-śruteśca.

However, ignorance is described as something positive though intangible, which cannot be described either as being or non-being, which is made of three qualities, and is antagonistic to knowledge. Its existence is established from such experiences as 'I am ignorant' and from such Shruti passages as 'The power belonging to God himself, hidden by its own qualities' (Shvetashvatara Upanishad, 1.3).

The meaning of this 'illusion' cannot be adequately described, because it is neither existent nor non-existent. As long as there is ignorance, illusion persists; but after realization illusion does not remain. The existence of ignorance is not absolute but relative. As we use expressions like 'as long as' and 'so long as' to characterize it, this illusion is not a permanent thing; it disappears on realization of Brah-

Vedanta-sara 51

man. In this sense, it is indescribable. It does not have a definite existence; nor is it definitely non-existent. So, how can it be described? It cannot be described as 'existence' or as 'non-existence'. Had it a definite existence, or had it been clearly non-existent, its description would have been possible. Hence, it is indescribable, illusory.

Suppose that in a desert you see a lake from a distance, and also a fountain right there. But when you go close, neither the lake nor the fountain is to be seen. Similarly, as long as the illusion of father, mother, and the like is present, you do not see the Reality; but when you go close to God, through spiritual practice, there is no more father or mother. This is the peculiar nature of illusion—existent as well as non-existent. *Ajñāna*, *avidyā*, *māyā* are its various names.

Devātma-śakti: It is the lila, play, of God; it is the māyā-śakti, the power of God's maya. 'Lila' itself means neither real nor unreal.

*Triguṇātmaka*: In this maya there are three *guṇas*. Although in reality they are 'not present', they appear when lila appears. When you sit for meditation, *sattva-guṇa* becomes active; when you are active, *rajas* manifests; and when passion arises, *tamas* dominates. Actually, nothing is there. It is only the play of God manifesting as the three *guṇas*.

*Jñāna-virodhi*: As darkness cannot stand before light, similarly at the dawn of knowledge ignorance, with all its *guṇas*, disappears. No more is there father, mother, the meditating sattvic 'we', the working rajasic 'we', and the passionate tamasic 'we'—all these disappear. In samadhi none of these exist.

Yat-kińcit bhāvarūpa: It appears as an existence, a tangible something, though it is unreal. The inner reality is the real bhāva, existence. A time will come when all will go beyond these three guṇas and will realize one's own real nature. Undertake spiritual practice with this consciousness, full of knowledge.

This ignorance has two aspects:

35. Idam-ajñānam samaṣṭi-vyaṣṭyabhiprāyeṇaikam-anekam-iti ca vyavahriyate. This ignorance is said to be one or many, according to the mode of observing it—either collectively or individually.

Individual ignorance is called *vyaṣṭi ajñāna*, but when we see the world as a whole, it is called *samaṣṭi ajñāna*. It is like the collective ignorance of A+B+C+D ...

36. Tathā-hi yathā vṛkṣāṇāṁ samaṣṭyabhiprāyeṇa vanam-ity-ekatvavyapadeśo yathā vā jalānāṁ
samaṣṭy-abhiprāyeṇa jalāśaya iti tathā
nānātvena pratibhāsamānānāṁ jīvagatājñānānāṁ samaṣṭy-abhiprāyeṇa
tad-ekatva-vyapadeśaḥ 'ajām-ekām'
ityādi-śruteḥ.

As, for instance, trees considered as an aggregate are denoted as one, the forest, or water is collectively named as the reservoir, so also ignorance, existing in jivas being diversely manifested, is collectively represented as one—as in such scriptural passages as 'There is one unborn' (Shvetashvatara Upanishad, 4.5).

This is being explained with the help of examples. Individuals are like single trees, whereas collectively they are the 'forest'. Similarly, when the ego vibrates in an individual it is the *vyaṣṭi* aspect, but when the 'I' and the ego, passions, and the like, of all individuals on earth, heaven, and other regions are taken collectively it is called *samaṣṭi* ignorance.

The function of ignorance over the Reality within you is called *upādhi*. This *upādhi* plus the Reality is called 'jiva'. This ignorance is without beginning and end. It is universal. It is in you, in Nehru, in Churchill, in Tito, in Indira, in heaven, in everyone. If you remember this, you will never be puffed up with pride. In the scriptures this collective ignorance is mentioned to warn you. Be cautious while mixing with people, otherwise there is possibility of falling. As long as there is individual ego and ignorance, a holy man must be careful: *sādhu sāvadhāna*.

(To be continued)

# Mahendranath Gupta: From Death to Immortality

#### Swami Chetanananda

(Continued from the previous issue)

N HIS MEMOIRS, Nityatmananda described a touching incident:

I was responsible for the printing of the *Kathamrita* while it was at the printer's, but I had many things to do and was unable to finish the proofreading in time. At 1.00 a.m. I saw a light in M's room. I entered and found he was reading the proofs of the Kathamrita by a kerosene lantern. He was not well at all, and moreover, as he was working at an odd hour, his eyes were watering. I was pained at this. I lovingly chastised him and he replied with affection: 'People are finding peace by reading this book, the Master's immortal message. It is inevitable that the body will meet its end, so it is better that it is used for spreading peace to others. We are in the world and have utterly experienced how much pain is there, yet I have forgotten that pain through the Kathamrita. I am hurrying so that the book may come out soon.' Indeed, M died while the last portion of the last volume was at the press. He was born to write and teach the Kathamrita.8

On the morning of 3 June 1932, M left Thakur Bari and walked to his residence in the Morton Institution—probably a fifteen-minute walk. He spent some time with his family and then returned to Thakur Bari. After that he prepared and ate his meal as usual, and then rested for a while. In the afternoon he swept his room and the ground floor. When questioned by a devotee, he said, 'I am cleaning this place a little.' Then he sat down and said, 'I am having a little spasm now.'

That evening he visited his family in the Morton Institution for a second time, and at 7.30 p.m. he returned to Thakur Bari with his grandson. He became exhausted on the way back to Thakur Bari and had to sit down on the footpath near City College. With great effort he continued his journey on foot. The vesper service was beginning at Thakur Bari. He went to the shrine on the third floor, bowed down to the Master, and then went to his room.

It was amavasya, the new moon night, and the auspicious night of Phalaharini Kali Puja. M sent Raghavananda and Satinath to Gadadhar Ashrama in South Calcutta, saying: 'Tonight there will be Kali Puja at the ashrama all through the night. Please go and attend the worship. One can achieve the result of a thousand years' austerity by doing sadhana on this auspicious night.' When they had left, M returned to the shrine. Brahmachari Balai was then putting the Lord to bed; M bowed down to the Master for the last time. He went to the open roof and looked at the bright stars in the dark night, which transported his mind to the realm of the infinite. He then looked in all directions from the roof of his dear Thakur Bari as if to say 'good-bye' to everything. He noticed that a wedding ceremony was being held on the roof of his neighbour's house to the south, and the *pandal* was beautifully decorated with multicoloured lights.

At 9.30 p.m. M came downstairs and ate his last supper—two pieces of Punjabi bread with milk, some vegetables, and two pieces of Langra mango that were prasad. After supper he washed his hands and rinsed his mouth. He then said to Balai: 'Please put the hurricane lamp on the table. I shall read the proof.'

M loved holy company and enjoyed talking about the Master, so he was always surrounded by

monks and devotees. Some of them even lived with him. On that night, however, M had sent everyone except Brahmachari Balai to Belur Math, Dakshineswar, and Gadadhar Ashrama. At 9.45 p.m. Balai went to his home nearby for supper and returned at 10.30. He found M asleep under his mosquito curtain. He then went upstairs to the shrine and began repeating his mantra. Within five minutes M loudly called Balai, who came immediately. He helped M to use the toilet.

M was suffering from excruciating pain, so Balai heated the salt bag on the top of the kerosene lantern and pressed it to his arm. M tossed around on the floor, leaning on the wall till 12.00 p.m. He was perspiring profusely. Finally, he asked Balai to call Sidu and Nishu, M's closest neighbours. Sidu did not respond but Nishu came. Balai asked Nishu to summon Ami, M's nephew, who also lived nearby. Ami was told that M was stricken with nausea, so he brought some carbonated soda water. M drank the entire bottle.

Ami then went to the Morton Institution to inform Prabhas, M's eldest son, who rushed to see his father, along with M's two grandsons. M asked them to spread a white blanket on the floor of his room, and he lay there on his right side, facing the east. He was having terrible pain in both of his elbows. One person pressed the heated salt bag to the spots that were paining, while someone else fanned him, another massaged him, and another attendant wiped away perspiration from his body with a towel. From time to time he prayed, 'Mother, my work is done.' He was trying to sit in a yoga posture, but the pain prevented him. He prayed, 'Gurudeva, Mother, please take me in your arms.' Thus he struggled till 2.30 a.m. His upper body was bare and he was rolling on the floor, pressing his chest.

Dr Dhiren arrived at 4.00 a.m. He offered a pill to M, but he refused to take it. He was fully conscious. Throughout his life he had been reluctant to accept service from others, and now seeing so many people caring for him, he told his grand-children, 'You go and sleep.' At 5.00 a.m. his wife, Nikunja Devi, arrived. M felt a little chilled, so a

chadar was spread over him. Then M asked to be put in bed. At 5.15 he threw up, and then slowly his restlessness began to subside. His body became calm and his face became serene and luminous. He began having difficulty breathing and said, 'This body will not last.' He then turned on his left side and said in a clear voice: 'Guru Deva, Mother, take me up in your arms.' Five minutes later, M passed away of a heart attack. It was 5.30 a.m. on Saturday, 4 June 1932 (21 Jaishtha 1339 BE).

M's mind had always dwelt in the Master, so his soul flew to the eternal abode of Sri Ramakrishna. The enchanting voice of the Bhagavata pandit, which had spread the divine message of Sri Ramakrishna for nearly half a century, became silent.

#### **Light after Death**

Within an hour the sad news of M's passing away was phoned to Belur Math, and then it spread all over Calcutta and to other centres of the Ramakrishna Order. Swami Shivananda, the president of the Ramakrishna Order, sent from Belur Math a silk cloth and chadar for M's funeral. Many monks from Belur Math and other Ramakrishna centres as well as devotees rushed to Thakur Bari to pay their homage and to have a last glimpse of a great soul. M's wife, sons, grandchildren, and other family members and neighbours wept bitterly. They all talked about M's love and care for them.

M's body was in his room. The monks were continually singing devotional songs, and then at 11.00 a.m. they began to prepare M's body for the final journey. Swami Pranavananda wiped M's face with a wet towel soaked in Ganga water; others carefully replaced his cloth with the silk cloth and chadar sent by Swami Shivananda. One monk put sandal paste on M's forehead and a garland around his neck. His body was covered with lotuses and roses. Raghavananda waved a lamp with five wicks and also a camphor lamp before M's body. Pranavananda also offered incense. Monks, a German devotee named Miss Feper, as well as teachers and brahmacharinis from the Nivedita School offered flowers. A new cot and a bed with a canopy were made ready outside

PB July 2010 45I

#### 'I Am an Avatar'

Standing in the pine grove of Dakshineswar, the Master said to me ['M']: 'I am an avatar. I am God in human form.' He also told me, 'I will have to be born again.' The Master proclaimed again and again, 'The greatest duty of man is to realize God.' And he himself fully demonstrated this ideal in his own life.

When an avatar descends, a current of bliss flows everywhere. So Christ said, 'Can the children of the bride chamber mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them?' Christ was an avatar. One day the Master told me, 'Christ, Gauranga, and I are one.' A person experiences uninterrupted bliss while he lives with an avatar. But when the avatar departs, sorrow and gloominess come. I forgot the world for five years. When the Master was with us we floated in bliss. Now I experience happiness one day and misery another. What a wonderful time we had with the Master—festivals, feasts, singing, dancing! When the Master passed away I fasted for three days.

I am an insignificant person, but I live by the side of an ocean, and I keep with me a few pitchers of sea water. When a visitor comes, I entertain him with that. What else can I speak but the words of the Master?

If anybody asks me what the greatest event of my life was, I would say that I met Sri Ramakrishna Paramahamsa—my Master.

—Ramakrishna as We Saw Him, 324

on Guruprasad Choudhury Lane—because the entrance of Thakur Bari was very narrow. M's body was transferred to a new thin carpet and the monks carried it from his room to the cot outside. People showered his body with flowers and perfume.

The journey began. Despite the summer heat and the hot pavement, the monks and devotees carried M's cot on their shoulders, barefooted, chanting, 'Victory to Bhagavan Sri Ramakrishna'. A kirtan party followed behind the cot, and the singing continued. Thousands of people followed the procession, with even more people joining on the way as they heard that M, the author of the *Kathamrita*, had passed away. Prabhas asked the coffin bearers to stop at the Morton Institution,

where M had lived for twenty-five years. The cot was placed in the courtyard of the school and M's eldest sister tearfully hugged her brother one last time. Other neighbours also visited him.

The funeral procession resumed, passing through Maniktala and Beadon Street. When it arrived at Cornwallis Street—now Bidhan Sarani—the traffic stopped for some time. The procession then crossed Tala Bridge, passed near the Kashipur gardenhouse, and finally arrived at the Kashipur cremation ground, where Sri Ramakrishna's body had been cremated on 16 August 1886. M's body was placed to the east of Sri Ramakrishna's monument, with his head towards the south. Some footprints were taken with red paint. Many men, women, and young people then offered flowers at M's feet.

Monks and devotees rubbed M's body with pure ghee, placed it on a carpet, and carried it into the Ganga for a bath. Meanwhile the funeral pyre was set up with heaps of sandalwood just to the south of Sri Ramakrishna's monument, and M's body was placed on it with his head towards the north. At 6.00 p.m. Prabhas offered sacrificial cakes and then set the pyre alight. Monks and devotees waved incense and lighted camphor and chanted 'Hari Om Ram Ram'. Swami Kamaleshwarananda stood near the funeral pyre and chanted Rudra mantras from the Vedas.

By 8.00 p.m. M's body had been consumed by the fire god and the monks came forward to extinguish the fire with coconut water, yogurt, and Ganga water. They then recited the peace mantra of the Yajur Veda: 'Filled with Brahman are the things we see. Filled with Brahman are the things we see not. From out of Brahman flows all that is: yet, is he still the same. Om Peace, Peace, Peace.'

Swami Shivananda had sent a message that M's remains were to be preserved in Belur Math, so the monks had brought two copper containers. Balai, along with two monks, collected the bones, washed them with Ganga water, and put them in the containers. An altar was made with Ganga mud on the spot where M's body had been cremated and a fence was set up all around it. Before this, the devotees had received permission from the Calcutta Corpor-

ation to preserve that spot for M's monument.

Charu, M's youngest son, was out of town. When he received the sad news, he came straight to the cremation ground. But as it was too late to see the body, he returned with his brother and other relatives to their home.

Swamis Jitatmananda and Nityatmananda crossed the Ganga with the copper containers containing M's relics; a portion of the remaining relics were immersed in the middle of the Ganga. The next day M's relics were worshipped along with the worship of the Master. Swami Shivananda then asked Jitatmananda and Nityatmananda to carry the containers to Swami Vivekananda's temple. Later, when Sri Ramakrishna's new temple was built, M's relics were taken to the upper floor of the temple, where the relics of the Master's other disciples are kept.

Once Girish Ghosh had asked M: 'What is the foremost ambition in your life?' M replied with a smile, quoting a Bengali proverb: 'If I go to my father's house, I shall take my husband with me.'9

M's greatest desire was not to be deprived of the Master's company. So, the Master fulfilled his wish: even after M's death, the Master kept his remains near him.

On 5 June 1932 Swami Shivananda consoled the bereaved Nityatmananda, who had been very close to M for many years. He said: 'M belonged to the Master and he came to fulfil Sri Ramakrishna's mission. When M's task was over, the Master took him in his arms. Indeed, M's physical body is gone, but look at those volumes [pointing to the set of the *Kathamrita* on his shelf]. They will proclaim his immortal glory forever. As long as there will be a sun and a moon, Sri Ramakrishna's name will be acclaimed on this earth, and along with it the name of M—the recorder of the *Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*.'<sup>10</sup>

#### References

- 8. Srima Darshan, 1.11 (Life).
- This refers to a bride speaking to her friends, indicating that she does not want to be separated from her husband.
- 10. Srima Darshan, 15.457-8.

(Continued from page 420)

Throughout the course of his lecture tours the Swami found his name blazoned in the papers. Reporters and editors literally besieged him. He was made to answer endless questions with regard to his habits of life, his religion, his philosophy, his views on Western civilization, his plans for future work, his diet, his antecedents, the manners and customs of his people, the political conditions of his land, and a host of other matters. The newspapers acquainted the American public with many details of his personal as well as his country's history—particularly of the latter, for India was his love, and the welfare of his country was his deep concern, of which he never tired of speaking.

Swamiji first visited England in September 1895. A correspondent of a daily journal who attended his class lectures gives an intimate description of his Vedanta preaching in London: 'It is indeed a rare sight to see some of the most fashionable ladies in London seated on the floor cross-legged, of course, for want of chairs, listening with all the Bhakti of an Indian chela [disciple] towards his guru. The love and sympathy for India that the Swami is creating in the minds of the Englishspeaking race is sure to be a tower of strength for the progress of India.' Returning back to the US, and then on a second visit to London, he delivered his famous lectures on jnana, karma, bhakti, and raja yoga, which remain authoritative texts on these subjects.

Thus it was Swami Vivekananda who correctly diagnosed the roots of India's ills and also prescribed suitable remedies. It was he who first made India known in her true perspective to the West, and in so doing created bridges between the East and the West that countless people have traversed ever since.

Rabindranath Tagore once told Romain Rolland, 'If you want to know India, study Vivekananda; in him everything is positive and nothing negative.' This statement also sums up Swami Vivekananda's legacy that we need to value and appropriate even today.

# **REVIEWS**

For review in PRABUDDHA BHARATA, publishers need to send **two** copies of their latest publications.



#### Recovering the Lost Tongue: The Saga of Environmental Struggles in Central India

Rahul Banerjee

Prachee Publications, 3-3-859/A/I, Lane Opposite Arya Samaj, Kachiguda, Hyderabad 500 027. E-mail: *joshippc@yahoo.co.in*. 2008. 352 pp. Rs 250.

group of people live in harmony with nature and A have minimal needs. They do not breach nature's inner recesses and find a cosy place in her lap. Their lives are drastically changed when some 'explorers' come to their home, claim the land they lived in for ages as their new-found land, and impose strange beliefs, customs, and languages on them. These new self-proclaimed rulers invent euphemisms for the original people—like 'adivasi' or 'aborigine'—which for them connote 'backwardness'. Flustered, the original people find themselves in search of a civilization, a livelihood—they end up with a 'lost tongue'. The new settlers exploit nature to the risk of extinction of its resources and soon realize that they have to conserve. That is when they turn to the practices of the original people, whom they have systematically annihilated. Absurd though it may seem, this is the story of the Native Americans, Australian Aborigines, African Pygmies, and various tribes of India. This is the story that unfolds in the present book, which is aptly subtitled. The author says: 'The devastation of nature and the decimation of populations living in harmony with it has been a singular feature of modern industrial development' (96).

This book tells us, through a captivating dialogue, the failings of free India in understanding the nature and the needs of its tribal people. It shows the follies in the formulation and implementation of state policies for tribals. This leads to protests, organized and unorganized, that are systematically quelled without supplying any solution to the problems. It is unfortunate and disheartening that even movements like the Narmada Bachao Andolan, which generated a lot of interest worldwide, fail to bring any concrete results.

This is the tale of the author, a graduate of the Indian Institute of Technology, who left a lucrative career to live among people who had very few supporters.

The author recounts how supposedly uneducated people of the tribes can fight for their cause if they are trained for it. This fight can never be substituted by the one of non-tribals for the tribals, as the latter is not a struggle from within. In his witty style, Rahul tells us how even daily habits like bathing are influenced by the natural surroundings; he also questions our wisdom in challenging apparently primitive customs. We find here an echo of activists like Anupam Mishra, who believe that many of the urban problems can be solved with the wisdom of ancient people.

The cover of the book depicts the state of the tribes of India. It shows a Bhil woman unhusking rice with her face veiled. This image brings home the stark reality of the extensive utilization of the tribal resources, all the while denying them their right to speak, denying them their identity. The unhappy state of women in the specific context of tribal life in India is portrayed with a hope that women can regain their rightful place by tackling the 'problem of patriarchal oppression'.

The story of the making of this book is much like the struggles it talks about. The present version of this book is a metamorphosis of the author's enormous research and recorded experiences, and it has been supplemented by the painstaking efforts of his friends, whose contributions he acknowledges. Containing material of value for social and environmental activists, this book will make a wonderful read for anyone concerned with human dignity.

Concluding her acclaimed paper 'Can the Subaltern Speak?', Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak says: 'The subaltern cannot speak.' She talks of marginalization of the rural, the tribal, and concludes that the marginalized have no voice. This book presents us a vivid story of such marginalization and pleads us to return the 'lost tongue' to the tribes. It is for us to act soon or they will lose their tongues forever.

Swami Narasimhananda Advaita Ashrama, Kolkata

## REPORTS



#### New Sub-centre in Australia

The Vedanta Centre of Sydney, Australia, acquired a church property in Perth to carry out its activities at 51 Golf View Street, Yokine, WA 6060. A twoday inauguration ceremony was held on 19 and 20 December 2009 to consecrate the newly acquired church, now renamed Vedanta Church of Universal Religion. The programme on 19 included Vastu Puja, Ganapati Puja, Navagraha Homa, worship of Sri Ramakrishna, Kali Kirtan, Ramnam Sankirtan, and evening arati. In the multi-faith prayer meeting, held the next, day religious leaders from various faiths offered their prayers and welcomed the Vedanta centre to Perth, appreciating its liberal and universal principles. Five monks of the Ramakrishna Order, a few devotees from overseas, and over 150 local devotees and dignitaries participated in the function.





Left: inaugural programme at the Vedanta Church of Universal Religion Right: front view of the church at Perth

#### Ramakrishna Mission Foundation Day

The Foundation Day of the Ramakrishna Mission was celebrated at Belur Math on 1 May 2010. Srimat Swami Atmasthanandaji Maharaj, President, Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission, chaired the meeting and released a commemorative volume and a booklet on the Ramakrishna Mission's relief services. Srimat Swami Smarananandaji Maharaj and Srimat Swami Prameyanandaji Maharaj, Vice Presidents, and Swami Prabhananda, General Secretary, Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission, Swami Suhitananda, and two lay members addressed the gathering. In all, 325 monks, 46 lay members, 51 associates, and about 250 devotees attended the programme.

Left: Swami Atmasthanandaji Maharaj releasing a booklet on relief services; right: monks attending the Foundation Day celebration



#### **News from Branch Centres**

The Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture, Kolkata, organized value orientation programmes to carry the man-making message of Swami Vivekananda to the youth at large through 205 youth conferences held in 11 districts of Kolkata, in which approximately 39,000

youths participated during 2009. In this connection another 9 district-level youth conferences were organized. The institute also held 5 district-level teachers' conferences, in which about 600 teachers participated, and one organization representatives' conference, attended by 162 organizations. Besides, two central youth conventions were held on 29 March and 29 November 2009 at the institute, and in them 2,450 youth delegates and 478 observers were present.

The newly set-up critical care unit at the hospital in Ramakrishna Ashrama, Thiruvananthapuram, was inaugurated on 5 May 2010.

On 6 May the Government of Delhi State organized a function in connection with the launching of their new website on Revised National TB Control Programme, in which Smt. Sheila Dikshit, Chief Minister, Delhi, presented a memento to Ramakrishna Mission, New Delhi, for its outstanding service in the area of TB control. Besides, on 21 May, the centre organized an interfaith seminar on 'A Tobacco-free Mankind', in which several religious leaders participated.

On 15 May Srimat Swami Prameyanandaji Maharaj laid the foundation stone for the proposed building with four rooms at **Ramakrishna Math**, **Bamunmura**, to be used by monks intending to perform austerities.

The newly constructed dispensary building at **Ramakrishna Mission Ashrama**, **Visakhapatnam**, was inaugurated on 16 May.

On 20 May **Ramakrishna Math**, **Madurai**, held a devotees' conference which was addressed by Dr A P J Abdul Kalam, former president of India, and several other distinguished persons.



Panels at the new anthropological museum in Cherrapunjee

An anthropological mu-

seum at Ramakrishna Mission Ashrama, Cherrapunjee, was inaugurated on 27 May.

#### **Achievements**

Arnab Rudra, a third-year BSc Physics (Honours) student of **Ramakrishna Mission Vidyamandira**, **Belur**, has been awarded the 'Srinivasa Ramanujan Studentship' for 2010 by the Trinity College, Cambridge University, for postgraduate study in its Department of Applied Mathematics and Theoretical Physics. This scholarship is awarded to only one student from India every year.

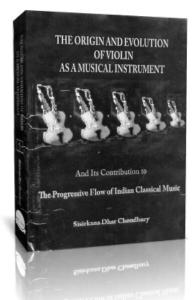
Sakthi Gnanavel (class 9) and Harishkumar (class 10), both students of the school at **Ramakrishna Mission**, **Chengalpattu**, won the 29th Sub-junior National Ball Badminton Championship held at Yamunanagar, Haryana, from 17 to 20 April.

The football team of the school at Ramakrishna Mission Ashrama, Narainpur, won the under-19 state open football championship, held at Bilaspur in the month of May.

#### Relief

Storm Relief • Silchar centre continued relief work in a district of Assam, which was affected by a devastating storm. During the month of May the centre distributed 520 saris, 416 dhotis, 1,377 CGI sheets, 157 CGI ridges, and 80 kg GI wires to 870 storm-affected families of 15 villages in Palongghat and Barkhola blocks, Cachar district.

Cyclone Laila Relief • In the wake of the recent Laila Cyclone in Andhra Pradesh, Vijayawada centre distributed 2,026 kg dal, 1,013 kg edible oil, 2,026 cotton blankets, and an equal number of towels, steel plates, steel ladles, and aluminium cooking pots to 1,013 severely affected families of seven villages in Prakasam district.



# The Origin and Evolution of Violin as a Musical Instrument

by Prof. Sisirkana Dhar Chowdhury

In this book an attempt has been made to trace the origin and development of violin as a musical instrument throughout the world. The book seeks to establish that the violin originates in India in a primitive form in the hands of Ravana, the mighty king of Sri Lanka (Ceylon). It was then known as *ravanastram* or *dhanuryantram*. The author sketches, in the limited compass of the book, a long history of the journey of this instrument covering an equally long period of cross-cultural perspective. From Europe again back to India is the total journey of violin with all its modifications and sophistications. This is the main thesis of this book which the author has successfully worked out.

This book constitutes the first part of the long term research which the author undertook as early as in 2004. The second part of the book is under preparation which covers the practical side about the technique of violin playing as practised by Hindustani musicians. It also incorporates some of the author's own compositions in vocal and instrumental music.

Price Rs. 400.00; \$ 35.00; £ 15.00

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#### SWAMI VIRESWARANANDA SMRITI COMMITTEE





We, an All-India Committee of devotees and admirers are bringing out a special volume on Srimat Swami Vireswaranandaji Maharaj, the 10th President of the Ramakrishna Math and the Ramakrishna Mission. The book will be trilingual (Bengali-Hindi-English) and will contain revered Maharaj's life, letters, articles, and photos along with reminiscences about revered Maharaj by monks, nuns, devotees, and admirers.

Anyone having interesting reminiscences / letters / photos of revered Maharaj can kindly send them to Sri. Shantanu Chowdhury at this address: SRIMA GROUP. # 62, Shalaka, D.N.Nagar, Andheri (W), Mumbai – 400 053.

E.mail: srima.chowdhury@rediffmail.com or sw.vireswarananda@gmail.com
Selection is at the discretion of the editor.

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